

Empowering Excellence

A symposium to celebrate the impact of the Colleges founded for women,
Saturday 8 December 2018 at the Harvard Club, New York

It is my privilege to welcome you to the first formal celebration of the 150th anniversary of the foundation of Girton College Cambridge. Established in 1869 as The College for Women, Girton was the UK's first residential College to offer university level instruction and examination to women, on the same terms and to the same level as men. It was a radical idea on which our founders refused to compromise. They had no interest in 'lectures for ladies' or in standards less stringent than those applied to men. To realise their vision, they, and their successors, were destined to spend fully 80 years campaigning for women's admission to degrees at the University of Cambridge. This means that Girton has spent more than half its history educating women to degree level without those degrees being awarded at the end!

Of course, such hurdles only spurred us on to underline and expand the enduring commitment to excellence and inclusion that we are celebrating today. Nevertheless, to be here, and to know that 150 years on Girton is thriving as a permanent foundation within the collegiate University of Cambridge, is a very proud moment. To be here in the present company makes me prouder still. What better way to herald our 150th birthday than in a room full of remarkable people, all inspired by the history and ethos of Colleges founded for the inclusion, advancement and empowerment of women. What better way to start than by reflecting on all that means for our most enduring principles: excellence, inclusion, justice, diversity and an ethic of care, to name but a few. What better way to herald 2019 than by recognising that Girton is part of an ongoing struggle and an unstoppable movement whose dynamics we shall explore this afternoon in two panel discussions led by some extraordinary women.

Our first panellists, reflecting on how women's leadership and advancement make a difference in an intersectional world, under the title 'glass ceilings and sticky floors' will be introduced by Girton alumna Dawn Airey. The fact that she herself is CEO of Getty Images gives you a clue about how high powered these panellists are. All of them have pushed out the edges of the envelope in some way, and each will, I hope, offer a glimpse of how their student days, in a College founded for women, helped shaped their life and work. It is a pleasure and a privilege to welcome you.



In our second panel, which I will introduce, we will hear from another group of distinguished women, this time from Girton's institutional counterparts among the Seven Sisters. These are the Colleges founded here, on the eastern seaboard of the USA, in the mid- to late- 19th century to provide an excellent liberal arts education for women excluded from the then-all-male Ivy League institutions. A warm welcome to the Presidents of Bryn Mawr, Mount Holyoke and Vassar Colleges, and the Dean of the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. I look forward to introducing you in a little while and reflecting with you on the game-changing legacy and ongoing potential of our remarkable Colleges, under the title 'pathways to excellence'.



Last but not least, welcome to everyone who is joining us for debate and discussion today, whether here at the Harvard Club, New York, in real time; or later, from across the world, via the internet. And thank you to my Cambridge counterparts at Newnham (Professor Dame Carol Black), Murray Edwards (Dame Barbara Stocking) and Lucy Cavendish (Professor Dame Madeleine Atkins) - the heads of the other Cambridge Colleges founded for women - who have sent messages for me to share as our discussions unfold.

Education matters: making herstory

This section will be short! You don't need me to remind you that the history of women's access to higher education is not lengthy. It may be true that since its foundation in 1088, the world's oldest University - Bologna - admitted some exceptionally able women, and even awarded them degrees. (In which case, all the major firsts for women's higher education technically belong to Italy). It is certainly true that throughout history there has been a scattering of brave, strong, persistent women pushing for access to education and entry to the professions. Some of them succeeded.

However, for the most part, any kind of general access to education - especially higher education - for women, and particularly anything on a par with higher education for men, was off the agenda until well into the 19th century. That is only a couple of lifetimes ago - we can still reach out through cohorts of alumni and almost touch the fingers of our founders.

Those founders, however, were part of a groundswell of activity, on both sides of the Atlantic in which education was integral to a wider movement to secure women's full participation in public, political and professional life. In fact Girton's founders - Emily Davies and Barbara Bodichon - were among the first three signatories to the first mass petition to the UK parliament for women's enfranchisement. Both were feminists, suffragists and prominent mid-19th century campaigners for women's rights. They and those like them battled to improve labour laws, penal reform, public health and protection against the sexual abuse of children.

As my colleague in Cambridge, Professor Dame Carol Black, Principal of Newnham (another pioneering College for women, founded just a couple of years after Girton) puts it. 'We were not founded by power or wealth but by a group of radicals who believed in education, learning and the right of women to shape their own lives'. Only this year, therefore, we have been marking the centenary in the UK of the votes for women their efforts eventually secured. To mark it, we have, with Newnham, been offering a scarf based on the banner made by the alumnae of Girton and Newnham to take on the suffragist marches of the early 20th century. Their motto was 'better is wisdom than weapons of war.'



Today, by the way, we have another scarf, designed by alumna Una Ryan to help celebrate 2019, gathering up into one silk square that meeting of arts and science that our interdisciplinary setting nurtures. That will be on sale soon, via the merchandising pages of our anniversary website at <https://girton150.com>

Getting back to the foundation of the Colleges for women ... The rate at which the campaign for degrees, votes and professional qualifications for women gathered speed around the mid-19th century means there are all kinds of 'firsts' that various institutions could lay claim to, as they prepared the way for institutions like ours to flourish.

Important antecedents to Girton in the UK for example include Queens and Bedford College London, founded in 1848 and 1849. They offered non- residential instruction, including lectures for women, that were not yet at the level the University of London offered to its men. It was a significant start.

Then came Girton in 1869 and Newnham in 1871 in Cambridge, followed by Lady Margaret Hall and Somerville College in Oxford in 1879, and others in due course, initially in the same vein, and later reflecting new projects. New Hall (now Murray Edwards College) in Cambridge, for example, was founded in 1954, partly through the efforts of its first President, former Girton Fellow Rosemary Murray, in anticipation of the likelihood that, after the University started granting degrees to women, higher numbers would be admitted. (Notwithstanding the fact that, until 1960, caps and quotas set limits on the number of women per college, and on the proportion of the Cambridge University student body that women could account for).

Likewise, the very first College in the USA chartered to grant BAs to women was, by a whisker in 1936, the Georgia Female College (later the Wesleyan College). It too was an important step, emphasising professional skills, again without the structures

required to match the offer available to men in the top US universities. The Seven Sisters of the north eastern seaboard, which did seek such parity for women, quickly followed and it is possible to find a first for all those represented at this symposium: Mount Holyoke was the first of the Seven Sisters to admit students, from 1837 (earlier in fact than the Georgia Female College whose first students came in 1839); Vassar was the first of the Seven Sisters to receive a collegiate charter, in 1861; Bryn Mawr was one of the first institutions of higher education in the United States to offer graduate degrees to women from 1885; and Radcliffe, which began as an annex to Harvard is the first and only of the Seven Sisters to merge - in 1999 - with the University whose exclusivity it was set up to oppose 120 years earlier.

That's probably enough on firsts! But don't be tempted to think that this is all the Colleges founded for women have in common. We differ individually course, and we work hard on the complementarities that implies; but we were established in solidarity around a common belief in the absolute right of women to access the same kind of education, on the same terms and to the same level as men. Our founders knew each other, our students exchanged letters and stories, and we shared a powerful common cause, which has meant that, in our histories, and indeed in our present and surely in our futures too, there are myriad interconnections, both personal and intellectual to find. Here are a few.

Some transatlantic connections

Thinking about early interconnections, I particularly like the story of Girton's Charlotte Angus Scott - a brilliant mathematician and Cambridge's first women wrangler (someone achieving first class finals results), whose scholarly success marked a turning point in the position of women in Cambridge. It is hard to publish a plausible class list if it is known to exclude the very best! By the age of 27, Charlotte had been recruited as the first woman professor at *Bryn Mawr* in 1885, where she stayed - inspiring generations of women mathematicians and a transatlantic flow of ideas - until she retired in 1925.

There are also some close early connections between Girton and *Vassar*, especially our founders' vocal insistence on women's absolute educational parity with men. Interestingly we now share with Vassar both the challenge and the opportunity of having been mixed for 40 (Girton) and 50 (Vassar) years. It is a challenge, because women's advancement is still absolutely critical in so many areas of life. That is why our first panel is called 'glass ceilings and sticky floors'. Being co-educational is an opportunity, however, because the principle of inclusion also matters to men and it changes our ways of working together.

We at Girton are also indebted to alumna Doris Russell who taught English at Vassar for over 20 years and now lends her name to a scholarship at Girton. Established to attract Seven Sisters graduates, and to strengthen our transatlantic ties, it is still awarded (though with a broader remit). It is indeed one of three graduate scholarships established to that end (the others being in the name of Elizabeth Stribling - herself a Doris Russel scholar - and Ruth Whaley).

Interestingly, some contemporaries saw the closest parallel with Girton as *Radcliffe*, especially given the early push back against women's admission applied with full force by both the Universities of Cambridge and Harvard. It is still shocking to know how long those otherwise-pathbreaking Universities - and others like them - stuck with idea that admitting women would compromise their qualities as top ranking institutions.

There is, though, another very interesting link between Girton and Radcliffe in that, in 1948, the year Cambridge University first awarded women their degrees, eminent Girton historian Helen Cam became the Zemurray Radcliffe Professor of History at Harvard, where she was the first woman to become a member of the faculty of arts and sciences. She was seen both as a symbol of what brilliant Cambridge-educated women could now aspire to, and as a fitting appointment given the perceived similarities between Radcliffe and Girton, which at that time had to do primarily with financial stringency.

Girton and *Mount Holyoke* also share quite a lot of early characteristics. Apparently our first few cohorts were known for their earnestness. Both our sites were thought of as homely but a little bit austere, and as we both expanded rapidly we kept tuition costs down by assigning domestic tasks to students (though Girton did employ maids). But there is an interesting twist, because in 1954 Mount Holyoke awarded an honorary doctorate in Law to Helen Cam. Helen Cam believed that College life was akin to a social contract: as a member you were tied to, and had to look out for, those around you, those who preceded you and those who are still to come. That sense of being linked in, and having a sense of mutuality and interdependence, it still very much part of our ethos.

I should, of course, mention that President Sonya Stephens, an inspired and inspiring leader for Mount Holyoke, is herself a Cambridge alumna - a decision encouraged by her links with Newnham, and followed through in her membership of Murray Edwards College; I am pleased (and relieved) to report too that at least one of her supervisors was from Girton. As well as welcoming Kavita Ramdas as one of our panellists, we are thrilled to embrace one of Mount Holyoke's most distinguished alumnae, novelist Anita Desai, who has joined us today to represent the honorary Fellowship of Girton. And so it goes on, as we trace out the life path of so many of

those who thread our pioneering institutions together. In short, it really does feel as if the Colleges founded for women are tied together by some exceptional qualities, some exceptional people, and a clear vision not only that education is the key to a better world, but that women's full participation and inclusion is a fundamental means to that end.

We shall embrace that today, as we reflect on all that we, and our remarkable alumni, have achieved in 150 or so years. I am mindful, of course, of the fact that there are many countries of the world in which the struggle for women's rights and women's education has gained very little ground, in all the time our Colleges have been thriving. I am also conscious more generally that 'progress' is not an easy word to apply to the ongoing struggles for inclusion, and for access to the life chances and opportunities that education affords.

So there is still work to do, and that is why, on the eve of the 150th anniversary of the foundation of Girton College, we relish the opportunity not only to reflect on all the Colleges founded for women have stood for, and all we have gone on to achieve, but also on the differences our alumni have made in the world, and on the challenges we shall tackle next.

Susan J. Smith, The Mistress, Girton College, Cambridge

Special thanks to Girton archivist Hannah Westall and historian Dr. Hazel Mills for their help in researching this introduction, and to all who bring ideas, enthusiasm and vision to this launch-event for Girton's 150th anniversary. We are grateful to Dawn Airey for chairing panel 1, and to Nici Bush, Lee Suet Fern, Kavita Ramdas, Una Ryan and Elizabeth Stribling for contributing to that discussion. Joining me on panel 2, it is a pleasure to welcome Elizabeth Bradley, Kimberly Cassidy, Sonya Stephens and Tomiko Brown-Nagin.

Photography credits (except Cambridge Alumnae Scarf): John Calabrese

