

# WOMEN IN UNIVERSITIES BEFORE WORLD WAR II

with particular reference to medical education in Liverpool

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The story of women's struggle to enter the medical profession in late Victorian Britain is well-known. It was a story of persistence in the face of great difficulty, involving courage on the part of the pioneers and marked by serial incidents of hostility and even violence. Events such as the 'riot' at Surgeons' Hall in Edinburgh in 1870, when Sophia Jex-Blake and her supporters were pelted with mud and 'decaying vegetation', have entered the canon of feminist historiography as examples of the obstacles faced by women fired with a mission, who fought against the forces of sex-hostility and male monopoly of the profession. Narratives of this period employ metaphors of mountain climbing or of the battlefield: one of the earliest chronicles of women's progress in medicine, written by E. Moberly Bell in 1953, was entitled *Storming the Citadel*.<sup>1</sup>

The experiences of medical women during the First World War have also attracted a good deal of attention from historians. Popular accounts have emphasised the War as a crucial testing time for women doctors whose courageous activities both at home and abroad eventually brought public recognition of their abilities and professional expertise.

But what happened after the war? We know less about the lives and careers of the women who qualified in the 1920s and 1930s, although we certainly know enough to doubt that this was a simple story of the gradual removal of professional difficulties, or a story of steady progress.

In London, the medical schools which had accepted women as students in the context of wartime difficulties and a shortage of manpower (St George's, St Mary's, Westminster, Charing Cross and the London Hospital Medical School) reverted to their pre-war male exclusiveness. There were movements of hostility towards women students, both in Oxford (which had conceded women's eligibility for degrees in 1920) and in Cambridge (which denied them full membership of the University until 1948). Alice Stewart, later to become a distinguished epidemiologist, was the daughter of two doctors and was encouraged to study medicine in Cambridge between the wars. She found her reception less than encouraging:<sup>2</sup>

There were four women and 300 men in my class. As I came into the lecture theatre and took my first step the men started to slowly stamp their feet in unison. I had to walk down the steps, to run the gauntlet, to sit on the front row with the other girls,

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<sup>1</sup> E. Moberly Bell. *Storming the Citadel; the Rise of the Woman Doctor* (London- Constable & Co., 1953).

<sup>2</sup> Gail Vines, 'A nuclear reactionary', *Times Higher Educational Supplement*. 28 July 1995.

along with one other person — I would never make friends with any medical student; I was having nothing to do with these 'scum', I said to myself.

But what of medical schools elsewhere in Britain? It is usually assumed that 'co-education' was taken for granted in the 'provincial' universities, which are often alleged to have made 'no distinction of sex'. Current research is bringing to light a rather more complex picture. As I have shown in a recent book on the subject, women teachers and students often experienced higher education in ways which were very different from those of their male contemporaries.<sup>3</sup> In the years before the Second World War 'women only' halls of residence, student unions, student societies and networks such as the British Federation of University Women played a crucial role in representing women's interests, needs and aspirations. This was also the case in medicine, where the Medical Women's Federation, which came into being in 1916, was important in defending the personal and professional claims of women.

Where does Liverpool fit into this overall picture? Late nineteenth century debates amongst the medical fraternity in the City show the same mixture of ambivalence and uneasiness about 'lady doctors' as was common elsewhere in the country. The Minutes of the Liverpool Medical School Students' Debating Society indicate that the question of women's claims to enter the profession was discussed at the first meeting of the Society, in 1874, and again in 1889. The women's case found supporters in the course of both of these discussions, but there was also some vociferous opposition. In 1889 Mr Holmes protested that there was no demand for the services of female practitioners and that, in any case, the desire to practise medicine was 'unnatural for a lady' and quite indelicate.

Liverpool received its charter as an independent university in 1903, and clause 27 of this charter confirmed that women were eligible for any degree or course of study in the university. However, as Thomas Kelly has pointed out, it took a while before the first woman medical graduate appeared in the lists.<sup>4</sup> This was Phoebe Mildred Powell (later Bigland) who graduated MB ChB in 1911. According to Arthur Gemmell, the first female entrants to the medical school had to sign an undertaking to comply with college regulations and to conduct themselves 'on all occasions in a manner befitting the character of a gentleman', although this requirement was modified a couple of years later.<sup>5</sup>

But formal acceptance by the university authorities did not guarantee easy or automatic acceptance by the male student peer group. In October 1905 the Medical

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<sup>3</sup> C. Dyhouse, *No Distinction of Sex? Women in British Universities 1870-1919* (London: UCL Press, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> T. Kelly, *For Advancement of Learning, the University of Liverpool 1881-1981* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1981), p. 131.

<sup>5</sup> A. Gemmell, *The Liverpool Medical School, 1834-1934, a Brief Record* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1934), p. 20.

Students' Debating Society decided (by 22 votes to 10) to allow women to become members. However, a Mr Gerard mounted a rearguard protest in December. He argued that the presence of women would curtail the men's freedom of debate, and suggested that the women would prohibit smoking. Their presence would lead to a degeneration of meetings to the level of 'pleasant afternoon affairs, and chocolates.' Miss Farmer, the first woman student whose presence was recorded in the Minutes, hastened to reassure him that this was unlikely, and the women were allowed to remain.

Medical student culture, however, retained a fairly masculine, boisterous quality, and this became if anything more marked after demobilisation and in the 1920s. 'Panto' festivities and Degree Day celebrations were occasion for much letting-off of steam. Kelly has remarked that men students reminiscing about the 'twenties rarely fail to mention the battles over a mascot known as Sister Jane,' a rag doll dressed as a nurse whose body was frequently dismembered in pitched battles between medics and engineering students keen to secure possession of the trophy.<sup>6</sup> It was not considered seemly for women to join too enthusiastically in this kind of event. Women students were not allowed to wear fancy dress in Panto celebrations and a certain amount of decorum was insisted upon by the authorities. On the academic side, not all the senior members of the Medical School were convinced that women were as central to the future of the profession as were men.<sup>7</sup> It is hardly surprising to find the women forming their own societies and support networks in what was still, essentially, a masculine milieu.

As early as 1909 women doctors in Liverpool and its surrounding district had come together to form 'The Liverpool Association of Registered Medical Women'. Frances Ivens had chaired the first meeting, which was held at 45A Rodney Street. The object was<sup>8</sup>

to safeguard and promote the interests of medical women and to take action when necessary in any matter which may concern them.

The Association grew in size and developed close links with medical women in Manchester and elsewhere in the North of England. It played an important part in the founding of the Medical Women's Federation in 1916: Frances Ivens was elected President of the national Federation in 1924. In 1921 the Liverpool branch established a 'Junior' or 'Associate' branch for women medical students. The majority of Liverpool's female medical students were enrolled, with Phoebe Bigland playing a very active role in organising events for them over the next few years.

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<sup>6</sup> Kelly, p. 269.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, minutes of University College Medical Students' Debating Society, debate on 2 February 1922 on the motion 'That the future lies with women'. Mr H. Cohen's opposition to the motion (which was lost by 42 votes to 65) is particularly interesting in this context.

<sup>8</sup> Minutes of the Liverpool Medical Women's Federation. held in the archives of the Liverpool Medical Institution.

After a buoyant beginning, student membership of the Associates' Branch declined in the late 1920s. This reflected a dramatic fall in the number of women studying medicine at Liverpool in these years. In 1925 Dr Bigland reported that the Associate membership had shrunk to 40, although there were only three women medical students in the university who had not joined.<sup>9</sup> The number picked up again in the 1930s. By this time the younger women had largely abandoned their separate activities and tended to be welcomed along to local meetings of the 'Senior' members of the Federation. These meetings provided opportunities to discuss a range of subjects of particular interest to women doctors between the wars, such as contraception and the control of venereal disease; they also afforded space to discuss the career difficulties of women in medicine, with the more experienced and established practitioners always ready with support and encouragement.

According to statistics published by the University Grants Committee, there were 130 women studying medicine in Liverpool on the eve of the Second World War and 733 men. There had certainly been a good deal of 'integration' between male and female students since 1903. However, there can be no doubt at all that the opportunities for career development in the profession were much more limited for women than they were for men. It is interesting to find that the first issue of the Liverpool Medical Students' Debating Society newspaper, *Sphincter*, which appeared in 1937, featured a letter written by a woman student (calling herself 'Jane Notsoplain') protesting that the Medical School was 'still run on lines suitable for, and, in fact, designed for men' which made life rather trying for the women, and arguing that the practice of medicine would benefit from 'a less trousered outlook.'<sup>10</sup> The replies to her letter showed that not all women agreed with her, but she touched upon controversies which were to continue for a very long time ahead.

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, entry for meeting on 14 March 1925.

<sup>10</sup> *Sphincter*, vol. I, no. 1, Autumn 1937. 9. See also correspondence in the following issue.