

The long and hard road to acceptance

Deirdre Raftery looks back at the 'place' of women in the early (and not-so-early) days of UCD at Earlsfort Terrace

The UCD campus at Earlsfort Terrace closes almost exactly 100 years after the National University of Ireland (NUI) admitted women students and staff on equal terms with their male counterparts. With the passing of the Universities Act (1908) two universities were established: Queen's University in Belfast, and the NUI with three constituent colleges (Cork, Dublin and Galway).

Women could attend lectures with men, they could take the same examinations, and - importantly - they did not need to be chaperoned.

The huge change that this brought about is perhaps only fully appreciated when one considers the resistance to female education that was commonplace in the late 19th century. It was not uncommon to read the views of prominent physicians in the popular press, advising parents that education could greatly damage their daughters.

In 1882, the prominent physician Sir Thomas Clouston declared: "I have seen girls, the daughters of well-grown parents, who simply stopped growing too soon. . . this being caused, as I believe, by the vital and nervous forces being appropriated by the mental part of the brain in learning".

His ideas were widely circulated at exactly the time that the first attempts were being made at opening higher education to women.

Resistance to educational provision for Catholic women also came from the Church. It was viewed that women fulfilled their destiny in marriage and motherhood, an attitude neatly reflected in the *Freeman's Journal* (September 22nd, 1883): "Now Ireland as a Catholic Nation wishes that women should adorn society more by virtue than by learning. . . it is the part of woman to become a faithful wife, a loving mother, the angel guardian of her family, and an expert housewife".

Against such a backdrop, it is perhaps not surprising to find that there was little interest in university education for women. However, in 1879 the Royal University of Ireland (RUI) was

established as an examining body, which awarded degrees.

Activists such as Isabella Tod (1836-96) managed to have women included under the terms of the Act, and this was to bring about immediate changes. Students entering for RUI examinations could be prepared at any college or private institution, a situation that suited women perfectly.

The first RUI women graduates were prepared at private "grind schools" such as McIntosh and Tinkler's, and at Protestant schools and colleges such as Alexandra College and Victoria College, Belfast.

Very quickly, Catholics expressed concern that Catholic girls who wanted degrees were being prepared at Protestant colleges. Dr William Walsh, Archbishop of Dublin, responded by asking the Dominican Sisters to establish a Catholic women's col-

lege in Dublin, and in 1893, St Mary's University College opened.

A year later, two more "women's colleges" opened: the Loreto College, St Stephen's Green, and St Angela's College, Cork.

In June, 1892, over 10,000 Irish women signed a memorial

requesting that Trinity College be opened to women. The response of the board was that parents did not send their sons to Trinity to find themselves "entangled in an imprudent match".

However, by the end of the century almost every university in England and Scotland had

allowed women to attend lectures and sit examinations, and in Ireland there was pressure to do away with the seemingly inferior "women's colleges" and simply open all universities to women.

In 1908, with the passing of the Universities Act, women could finally enter the university col-

leges as students and as staff. Among the first distinguished women academics appointed at UCD was the historian Professor Mary Hayden, who lectured there from 1909 to 1938, and served on the UCD Governing body and the NUI senate.

Within the same period, Pro-

fessor Mary Macken lectured in German, Maria Deganai was a professor of Spanish and Italian, and Agnes O'Farrelly became Professor of Irish in 1932.

AT EARLSFORT TERRACE, women attended university lectures, but their contact with the opposite sex was limited.

They lived at home, or in university residences such as Loreto Hall and Dominican Hall on St Stephen's Green, and they sat together in lectures.

Women were often self-conscious, as they negotiated the predominantly male territory that was Earlsfort Terrace, and even the very steps of the UCD buildings on St Stephen's Green were social minefields.

In the *University Review* (1962), novelist Kate O'Brien (UCD 1916-1919) recalled "the ordeal of coming out of the Green at the gate that fronted 86 .

Left: The Nine Graces - the first nine women to graduate from university in Ireland. Below left: women students at Earlsfort Terrace, and below right: Anne Kernan lecturing at the Terrace



. . . the porch was filled all day with male geniuses, and though one was not finally concerned with the opinions of one's hat, or legs, or intelligence that might be pronounced as one passed, by Eimar O'Duffy or Long John Meagher. . . or Michael Tierney - still one was young and momentarily at their mercy".

Like many of the early UCD students, O'Brien had clear memories of the Physics Theatre filled with hundreds of youths, the "crumpled black" of the seminarians and the groups of girls sitting together at the front.

A student in the late 1940s, Mildred O'Brien (née Collins) also recalls that the women students sat at the front of lectures, directly behind any nuns who were students, and in front of all the men.

She remembers the social life at UCD vividly: "We went to the 'hops' on Tuesday and Friday nights, which finished about 9.30pm, and we had to be back into Loreto Hall on the dot of 10pm. And there were marvellous dress dances run by the college societies, and held in the Gresham Hotel. They cost 12/6d, and we went to three or four of those each term, wearing the same dress several times. We had a busy social life at the Terrace. And of course you could fail exams forever and just repeat them - there was no rush."

Women used the Ladies' Reading Room inside the main hall, but they also had access to the library and the college restaurant there. The restaurant allowed social contact with male students, as did the college societies.

Women students didn't typically frequent pubs before the 1930s and 1940s, but strolled over to the Monument Creamery, or Robert's Café.

University life was centred on Earlsfort Terrace. And Belfield, as one graduate recalled: "Was merely a place where you went to play tennis on poor courts."

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