

**Trinity Monday Discourse, May 10 2004**

**Alice Oldham and the admission of women to Trinity College, 1892-1904.**

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Provost, Fellows, Scholars, colleagues and distinguished guests:

It is a pleasure and a privilege for me today to be invited to give the Trinity Monday discourse as College celebrates the centenary of the admission of women. I have chosen to speak on Miss Alice Oldham who was a leader of the campaign for higher education of women in Ireland and in particular of the campaign to gain admission for women to Trinity. She herself was one of the first women graduates in Ireland, graduating from the Royal University of Ireland in 1884, twenty years before the admission of women to Trinity.

However in 1904, when women were finally admitted to TCD, Oldham was not awarded an honorary degree by College as were other leaders of women's education, such as Dr Isabella Mulvany, head of Alexandra School, Miss Henrietta White, principal of Alexandra College, Dublin, and Mrs. Margaret Byers, principal of Victoria College, Belfast. Oldham was a strong, determined and at times abrasive personality, who gave no quarter to the Board of Trinity College in her campaign, and thus appears to have antagonized the College authorities so much that she was ignored, snubbed even, in 1904 when women were finally admitted. Indeed she may have seemed to the Board as

personifying their worst fears as what university educated women would be like - argumentative, unsubmitive and with a razor sharp intellect. As a campaigner, Oldham was indefatigable, bombarding the College with correspondence, taking the campaign into the national press and meeting argument with argument. She was no 'dutiful' quiescent woman, who would resort to charm or guile, and as such, probably hindered her own cause among the elderly conservative men whom she was trying to persuade to yield to her demands. This formidable woman failed in her campaign between 1892 and 1895 to gain admission for women, and had to admit defeat, but she had made such severe dents in the door with her kicking, and that, ten years later, what had been impossible for College in 1895, became both possible and expedient by 1904. Oldham lived to see the victory of her work, but ill health had taken its toll, and sadly she died in 1907 at the age of 57. She did not witness the flowering of her work, both in the achievement of women students at TCD or in the equality of access granted to women students in the new National University of Ireland founded in 1908. Her only memorial in College is the Alice Oldham Memorial prize which is awarded biennially to the student judged to be the most distinguished of the women students in their Junior Sophister year, and who have attended classes at Alexandra College for at least one session.

### **Thanks**

At the outset of this paper, I would like to acknowledge the assistance of my colleague in the Education Department, Elizabeth Oldham, a cousin of Alice Oldham, who gave me family details, and also of Lucinda Thomson, TCD graduate in history, who has researched and written the relevant chapter on the campaign for admission in the new TCD women's history published last week. Lucinda and I have enjoyed many

discussions about Miss Oldham and her strategy during this last year. (Also we welcome Mrs. Enid Oldham, mother of EEO and thank you for bringing the portrait of Alice Oldham which is by S.C. Harrison).

### **Opposition to Women's Higher education**

Opposition to the higher education women was still strong in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The main arguments used against it were that women were not capable of serious academic study, they were intellectually inferior. Moreover, too much study, stooped over books would be bad for their posture, would harm their delicate health, their femininity and their fertility. (The term 'Blue Stocking' was used to mock the intellectual woman who was interested in books and study. The name had its origins in an eighteenth century London salon where intellectual women met and one of their male admirers wore the rough blue stockings of a workman rather than the silken hose of a gentleman to indicate his opposition to the artificiality of society life.)

In addition it was argued that the higher education of middle class women would be a 'waste of time' as the majority would devote their lives to marriage and family life and would be financially supported first by their father or brother, and then by their husband or son. The most important step for a young middle-class woman was a 'good marriage', and what she most needed for that was education in the so-called 'drawing -room accomplishments' - good deportment and conversation, some Music, Art and perhaps a little French. However, some middle-class women were forced by circumstances to earn their own living, but the careers open to women were often limited to teaching or being a governess or housekeeper in another household. It was feared, and rightly so, that the higher education of women would upset the balance of family life,

would lead to further demands for equality such as the franchise, the opening of the professions such as Law and Medicine to women, and that it would create unfortunate competition between men and women for employment. Even up to the mid-twentieth century women in many positions were required to resign on marriage, being thus taken out of the labour market and their energies channeled into the private domestic sphere.

### **Girls' High Schools**

However attitudes to women's education had begun slowly to change in the second half of the nineteenth century. The foundation of a number of girls' academic high schools had led to the introduction of a more rigorous academic curriculum of study for girls, modeled on that of their male counterparts and including subjects such as mathematics, the Classics, history and geography and science. In Dublin, Alexandra College had been founded in 1866 for the higher education of women and its feeder school, Alexandra School, six years later. In Belfast, Victoria College for girls opened in 1859 and in Derry, Strand House School. For Catholic girls, the religious teaching orders most concerned with the education of the middle class, in particular the Loreto order, the Dominicans and the Ursulines, had begun to provide academic education in their convent schools such Loreto in St Stephens Green, Dominican Convent, Eccles Street and St Angela's in Cork. These new girls' high schools had been greatly assisted by the introduction of a system of state examinations for schools from 1878. The Intermediate examinations, as they were known, were open to girls' schools from the beginning (Girls' schools were only included in the 1878 Intermediate Education Bill after a group of the women including Alice Oldham went to London to lobby). Although the Intermediate system of 'Payment by Results' tended to put much strain on both pupils

and teachers (the school was paid a grant by the exam board dependent on the pupils' exam results), the girls' school benefited from the system. It allowed girls to take the same examinations as boys and thus prove their intellectual ability. It also brought indirect state funding to the schools that enabled them to improve their facilities such as a science laboratory, a gymnasium, a library, etc. <sup>1</sup>

### **Royal University 1879**

A further impetus to girls' education came in 1879 with the founding of the Royal University of Ireland whose degrees were open to women. Modeled on London University, the RUI was an examining university only and did not provide teaching. However, the girls' high schools, both Catholic and Protestant, seized the opportunity and developed higher education classes at the top of their schools to prepare students for degree examinations. It was from these classes that first women graduates emerged, particularly in the first years, from Alexandra College. As the demand for better provision of higher education for women began to grow, the Central Association of Irish Schoolmistresses (CAISM) was founded here in the Provost's house in 1882 with Mrs. Jellett, the provost's wife, as its first president. It was an organization of mostly RUI women graduates who worked and lobbied for the improvement of girls' education. Since the Catholic religious orders were not allowed by the Church authorities to join the CAISM. It consisted of staff from Protestant girls' schools, but it spoke with a voice for all girls' education in Ireland. Alice Oldham was its first secretary.

### **Irish Universities**

The Irish universities up to now had been little troubled by the demand for higher education for women. However in 1869, Girton, the women's pioneer college at Cambridge, had been founded by Emily Davies, and Newnham College at Cambridge (1873), Somerville College (1879) and Lady Margaret Hall (1879) at Oxford soon followed its example. In London, Bedford College (1849), Westfield College (1882) and Royal Holloway College (1886) offered higher education to women. These colleges set a high standard for women's academic achievements and although the two ancient universities still refused to award degrees to women, from the 1880s women at both the Oxford and Cambridge colleges were allowed to sit for the university examinations. The new civic universities in England, such as Liverpool, Leeds, Manchester, were open to women, as were now the Scottish universities and the new federal University of Wales (1893). In 1895 Durham was the last English university to open its doors to women, thus leaving TCD in a vulnerable and almost indefensible position.

In Ireland the three Queen's Colleges, which had been founded 1845 in Belfast, Cork and Galway, had been opened to women from the 1880s but the numbers attending had remained small. This was due partly to the lack of provision of girls' secondary education and the Catholic Church's ban on attendance at non-denominational colleges. Also because, for example in Belfast, many of the girls (and their parents) preferred to continue to attend the university classes at their old school, Victoria College, and take their RUI degree examinations from there. The problem for the women in Dublin was that, despite being allowed to take the Royal University degrees, there was no university college in Dublin, which women could attend, as neither TCD nor the Catholic University College in St Stephens Green were open to women. On the other hand the

Catholic University Medical School in Cecilia Street was opened to women in 1896 and some of the earliest Irish women doctors were trained there.

### **TCD Exams for Women, 1869.**

Trinity College, despite its later conservatism, had led in the way in development of the higher education of women by introducing in 1869 special Examinations for Women in response to a request from Alexandra College. The examinations were held once a year in two grades, junior and senior. A syllabus was published but the university provided no teaching, so the girls were expected to study at home or in their school. The subjects offered included not only the more conventional ones like English and History but also Classics, Mathematics, French. Botany, Zoology, Geography. The exam papers were set and marked by the university staff. The numbers entering had remained small and, following the introduction of the state Intermediate examinations in 1878, the value of the TCD Examinations for Women declined. The schools preferred to enter their pupils for the recognized state certificate examinations. Nonetheless the TCD Examinations for Women had served a useful purpose in demonstrating to College that women students were capable of sustained academic work even in the challenging areas of Classics and Mathematics.

In 1873 a request for the admission of women to the same university examinations as men had been made by Miss A.B. Corlett on behalf of the Queen's Institute of Female Professional Schools on the grounds that separate examinations for women were of little value. In 1880 at a meeting of Council a proposal was made by Dr Samuel Haughton and seconded by Dr Anthony Traill, that women should be allowed to

sit the same university examinations as men in Arts, but this motion was lost, as was another similar one two years later.<sup>2</sup>

### **Tercentenary Memorial 1892**

However, by the time of occasion of the College's Tercentenary celebrations in 1892, the demand for the admission of women to higher education had steadily gained support and in June of that year College received a Memorial signed by over 10,000 Irish women asking for women students to be admitted. Though overall tone of the Memorial was deferential and flattering, it stressed the academic achievements of women and the value to society of their higher education. It emphasized how the College could mark the occasion of its Tercentenary by opening its doors to women, and that there were many women eager to obtain culture and knowledge in the foremost university in the country.<sup>3</sup> This 1892 Memorial was the work of the Central Association of Irish Schoolmistresses of which Alice Oldham was the secretary.

### **Alice Oldham 1850 –1907 and CAISM**

Alice Oldham was born in Dublin in 1850, one of the twelve children of Eldred Oldham, a Dublin linen draper, Her younger brother, Charles Hubert Oldham, was a distinguished economist who later became the first professor of National Economics at UCD, while her sister Edith, a talented musician and a founder member of the Feis Ceoil in Dublin in 1896, married Richard Best, director of the National Library. It was said the Oldhams were a family of 'large noses and iron wills' and Alice was to prove a good example of both. Educated at Alexandra College, she returned there to teach and study and in 1884 she was one of the so-called 'Nine Graces' - the first nine women to be

awarded degrees by the Royal University. However, even before that she had begun to be involved in public life and became a member of the Dublin Women's Suffrage movement. In 1878 she had been a member of the delegation led by Mrs Byers of Victoria College to London to lobby on behalf of girls' schools to be included in the Intermediate Education Bill.

### **CAISM 1882**

At that time women educators were determined that girls would take the same school examinations as boys, so when it was hinted that the Intermediate Board was considering introducing separate examinations for girls, Alice Oldham had led the way in founding the Central Association of Irish School mistresses to speak on behalf of the girls' schools. Alice Oldham became its first secretary and worked tirelessly for the women's cause. CAISM wrote frequently to the Intermediate Board concerning matters of the curriculum, the marking system, the girls' prizes and exhibitions etc and Alice Oldham developed her political and administrative skills from this work. The drafting of memoranda and the power of rational argument became hallmarks of her style. A reserved, shy, some would say severe, woman, she excelled at the written word. She continued to teach at Alexandra College where she offered classes in a wide range of subjects including English, History, Logic, Ethics, Latin and Botany. A genuine scholar she enjoyed introducing her pupils to new knowledge and after her death a series of her lectures on Philosophy was published in 1909 as a book entitled *An Introduction to the study of Philosophy* (Dublin, 1909). This book contained a historical survey of the writings and ideas of philosophers from the Ancient Greeks to Hegel, as well as a short

history of Ethics and a study of psychology. As a teacher she was much admired by her students who nonetheless were much in awe of her.

### **Debate with Miss Henrietta White**

At Alexandra, Oldham did not always see eye to eye with her much more ‘queenly’ and elegant principal, Miss Henrietta White, but both of them shared a determination to win the right to university education for women. At that time in the 1890s there was a strong difference of opinion among the women graduates themselves as to whether women should seek to establish a separate women’s college modeled on the Oxbridge colleges, and thus providing a high standard of community and academic life for women, or whether they should support co-education and seek entry to the existing men’s colleges which would be much better endowed, and would provide full equality of teaching and examinations for women. Alice Oldham herself favoured the later solution, believing that only through a co-educational structure would women gain full equality, and hence her determination to fight for admission to TCD. Miss White, on the other hand, favoured the single sex model for women’s higher education, and she hoped very much that Alexandra College would become a recognized college of the University of Dublin. .

### **1892 Memorial**

When the Board of Trinity College received the Memorial in June 1892 it did what it was often good at doing - nothing. The College was in a very confident position just then, in the midst of its three hundred years celebrations and it saw little reason to consider such a proposal. It did not need women students and the Provost Salmon himself

was himself adamantly opposed to such a suggestion. 'Over my dead body will women enter the College.' Therefore the Board simply noted that what it called 'a Memorial from a number of Ladies interested in the higher education of women' had been received. A month later EP Culverwell, the mathematician and later first professor of education in College, raised the matter at Board, but was informed the 'the subject would be reserved for future discussion'. It was not until March 1893 the matter was raised again at Council, and College again did what it was good at doing – set up a Subcommittee of five to consider the matter. This Sub-Committee was important in that it consisted of some of the younger men who supported the women's cause in College - Dr JH Bernard, Archbishop King's Lecturer in Divinity, Dr JP Mahaffy, professor of Ancient History, Dr Anthony Traill, assistant to the Professor of Natural Philosophy, JK Ingram, professor of Greek, and Edward Bennett, professor of Surgery. Without the support of men such as these the women would have had no voice in College and would have found it nigh impossible to move things along.

### **Council Subcommittee 1893**

This Council Sub committee did not report back until November 1893 and its report favoured the admission of women under certain conditions. The only one to abstain from signing with the report was Ingram. The report was far sighted and in many ways laid the foundations of the later plan. The Committee had first considered the possibility of using Alexandra College to provide freshmen lectures in Arts but decided that this would be 'unworkable and expensive'. In stead the women should be admitted to the same lectures as men except in Junior Freshmen ordinary Arts lectures and it was noted that some of the Latin texts would need to be changed as they were unsuitable for

young women. (e.g. Juvenal). The report also wisely referred to the legal difficulties which were involved and stated clearly that the admission of women did not in any way 'carry their admission to membership of the Corporation of Trinity College, or entitled them to present themselves at the examinations for Scholarship and Fellowship'. This was a warning of the problems to come – in the end the women did accept the offer of admission to degrees without being offered equality of rights within the College. Council debated this report from November to June even continuing to six o' clock on occasions, but no decision could be reached.

### **'Mixed Classes' 1893**

Meanwhile Alice Oldham and her Association waited and waited for a reply to the 1892 Memorial. In the intervening months they had not been idle. In March 1893 on the advice of E P Culverwell, the CAISM had organized a survey of 'mixed' classes in other universities that offered co- education. The evidence collected was highly supportive of co-educational higher education. Replies were received from Newnham and Girton Colleges at Cambridge, from Edinburgh University, University College, London. University College, Bristol. Mrs. Sidgwick of Newnham had compiled a file of 'Answers of Cambridge Lecturers to Questions relating to the Teaching of mixed classes of Men and Women'. The vital health statistics showed that women were fully capable of sustained study without damage to their health, and indeed some lecturers had actually found the presence of women in lectures beneficial, as they had a steadying influence on the class and 'nothing in the nature of flirtation' occurred. This information was sent by CAISM to the Board in April 1893 but as the Council Sub- Committee of five had not yet reported, nothing further was heard.

### **Request for Deputation, 1894**

We now arrived at March 1894 when Alice Oldham received a letter for the now Registrar, Ingram, suggesting that the women should propose a less ambitious scheme for the admission of women (for example could take the university examinations but not attend lectures? Sit examinations but not receive degrees.) As Registrar, Ingram, found himself in the next few months defending the College against the onslaught of Miss Oldham. It is important to note that Ingram was considered a liberal in his day. He had admired the ideals of the 1798 and was know for his famous poem “Who fears to Speak of ‘98’”. He had been supportive of Alexandra College and of women’s education in its early years. However, he was seventy and a strong College man, having served in various capacities as Librarian and Senior Lecturer.<sup>4</sup> Alice’s Oldham patience was beginning to wear thin and to a certain extent she took the matter into her own hands getting involved in lengthy and bitter correspondence with the Registrar. A revised scheme was drafted and sent to off to the Registrar but nothing further was heard, save an acknowledgement.

However the CAISM were fortunate at this stage in having an experienced ally in the barrister, William Graham Brooke, who was a strong supporter of women’s education. He had published a pamphlet in 1869 entitled ‘Educational Endowments’ in which he had stressed the need for support for girls’ schools and the education of women. He was on the Council of Alexandra College and of the Church of Ireland Training College and it was he who suggested that the women should ask the College to receive a deputation of the women to express their case in person. This was duly done, but College agreed only to meet a deputation of three men to present the women’ case.

In June 1894 Council agreed to receive the deputation made up of W.G. Brooke, Mr A Samuels QC and Judge Madden. Unfortunately on the day Judge Madden was unable to attend but the meeting went ahead. The Board on the other hand hummed and hawed and then wrote to say that a meeting would have to be postponed until the autumn as 'the Provost was away and pressure of business at the end of term.' After the vacation, they hoped to be able to make the necessary arrangements. The meeting eventually took place in October 31 1893 with three men presenting the women's case, Professor Cunningham of Anatomy taking the place of Samuels

### **Bernard's Letter**

In the midst of all this Alice Oldham's zeal caused an embarrassing episode. In order to prepare the male deputation for these meetings with College she had, at the request of Brooke, drafted up a statement regarding the details of the correspondence which CAISM had had with College since 1892. Following the meeting with Council in June '94 she revised this statement, outlining the key arguments that had been discussed at the Council meeting. Dr. J.H. Bernard, a member of Council and one of the women's allies, was very annoyed at how she had found out so much about the Council meeting which he had considered to be private and confidential. He wrote angrily to Brooke to express his annoyance, - Brooke apologized and said that Miss Oldham had not been told all the details from HIM, and that he would now advise Miss Oldham to withdraw the statement, which she agreed to do. She herself then wrote to Bernard to apologize for 'knowing too much' but she had lost a valuable ally on Council.

### **Counsel's Opinion**

After the meeting of CAISM with the Board in October 1894, Oldham continued to write to Ingram asking for a reply. By January 1895 she wrote again, to which Ingram replied that 'the whole matter was still under consideration'. In February she wrote again and this time Ingram reprimanded her sharply and warning her' that great institutions could not make hasty decisions and: 'With a fundamental change in an ancient and important institution such as Trinity College, it is necessary to consider the question maturely, both from the point of view of law, in order to ascertain whether and in what way, such action could be legally taken, and then from the point of view of general expediency'.

Ingram was raising two important points here – one was the question of the legal right of College to admit women – the other was whether it was expedient or necessary to do so.

College decided at this point to seek Counsel's opinion on the legality of admitting women to a male foundation. (Perhaps they were hopeful that it would be found illegal and therefore put an end to it) The Counsel chosen were two elderly 'wise' men, Serjeant Jellett, brother of the previous Provost, and Piers White, who in due course returned the advice that it would indeed be illegal to admit women and that it would require an Act of Parliament to alter it. The key Latin words in the Statutes were *Studentes* and *Studiosi* which were deemed to be male nouns and did not include female students. Ingram wrote on 7 March to inform CAISM of Counsel's advice and to say that if any of the gentlemen representing the women wished to see the papers, they could do by calling to the Registrar's Office.

In a short reply to the Board, requesting that College should apply for an Act of Parliament; Oldham pointed out just how limited the women's request was. It did not include a claim for the parliamentary franchise, or admission to any office in the University. This shows how, rightly or wrongly, the women were prepared at this stage to accept a lesser status within College and it also showed that they were distancing themselves from their more strident and forceful Suffragette sisters. The Board replied to the effect that it was not prepared to seek an Act of Parliament alone, without the inclusion of Oxford and Cambridge, on which their Statutes were based and which gave mutual recognition to University of Dublin degrees

By this time the CAISM were utterly frustrated and threatened to go to the public press with the case. W. G. Brooke had compiled a formal printed statement that contained all the correspondence, which the CAISM had with College since 1892. Thus in May 1895 the Registrar found himself engaged in a unseemly public 'warfare' of letters with Alice Oldham, arguing about the details of the women's case. Undoubtedly this episode was the last straw as far as the Board was concerned and their dislike and fear of Oldham steadily increased.

### **Board Statement, June 1895**

As might well be expected, the decision to move into a public press campaign had the opposite effect on College to that which was intended. It hardened attitudes and forced a decision, and so in June 1895 the Board issued a final statement declaring that it would not admit women and three years of campaigning by CAISM and Oldham came to nought.

In this 1895 statement the Board laid out the social reasons as to why it could not and would not admit women. The dangers of co-education and the entry of young women on to male residential campus were highlighted. (It is from this is that we have chosen the title ‘A Danger to the Men?’ for the centenary history of women)<sup>5</sup>. The statement reveals the fears of the Board concerning the ‘dangers’ of co-education. Trinity College was a male residential college for young men and parents had a right to know that their sons would be supervised and would be placed under the discipline of the College. One of the main disciplinary regulations was that young women were not allowed to enter through the College gates and even if the female students were to be chaperoned, it would not be possible for the College gate-porters to distinguish between a young student and a young chaperone. Once a female had entered through the gate, it would not be possible to know where she might go or into what buildings she might enter, or for how long.<sup>6</sup>

The statement went on to say that, while the Board accepted that most of their male students were of good character, and that the young women who entered would be strong to resist temptation, a scandal could occur and even worse ‘imprudent marriages’. Over all the Board were not prepared to take the risks that the introduction of young women into lectures would bring. At the conclusion of the 1895 Statement the Board offered as a ‘sop’ to extend the Examinations for Women to make them more widely acceptable. In the future, women, who were successful in these examinations, would be allowed to proceed to Senior Freshmen honor examinations and eventually to moderatorship examinations, for which they would receive certificates.

Oldham and the CAISM were bitterly disappointed by the 1895 statement that effectively put an end to their campaign. Despite the support of the younger men in

College, the campaign had not been sufficient to overcome the prejudices of the older men. In July 1895, Oldham wrote her last letter to the Board to refute the basic arguments of their case. She declined to comment on the Board's apprehensions regarding the dangers of coeducation' other than to point out that in many institutions around the world men and women attended lectures together, and CAISM could not accept the 'such groundless fears were valid reasons for withholding from women the culture they sought' ` She pointed out that both Oxford and Cambridge had allowed women students to attend university lectures and to sit for the university examinations since the 1880s, and that the concept of Examinations for Women with no systematic course of teaching was long gone. Indeed, it seemed a 'mockery' to make so useless an offer. She concluded angrily and sadly that it pained her to see how the chief university in Ireland was so lacking in generosity that it would not share its wealth and resources with a part of the community that so eagerly sought culture and education.<sup>7</sup>

*TCD Miscellany*, which was founded as a student review in 1895, included a satirical article in May on Oldham; 'Place Aux Dames ' A New Woman' (18/5/95)

There on the white foam high upon the crest of the tempestuous billows of surging womanhood, lashing the shores of our Isle of Man, sits Miss Oldham. The meaning of this is that those ladies, who are anxious to receive such an education as this university now bestows on the male sex, having for several years carried on fruitless negotiations with the College authorities, have appointed Miss Oldham as their *pro locutrix* to demand entrance.

In fact *TCD Miscellany* did become more supportive of the women' cause in later years and was intrigued as to what the College would call such students as 'Maids of Honour', 'Mistress of Arts', 'Spinster of Science', and 'Sweet Girl Graduates'. It also suggested by *TCD* that academic dress would need to be changed to suit the female figure.

### **Influence of Alice Oldham**

Alice Oldham therefore, badly wounded, withdrew from the struggle with Trinity and returned her failing energies back to the work of CAISM with the Intermediate school examinations. She gave evidence to the Palles Commission on Intermediate Education in 1898 in which she emphasized that, despite its drawbacks, the examination system had been and still was of great benefit to girls' education and that it had helped to raise the standards of the academic curriculum of secondary schools.<sup>8</sup> She also returned to the broader canvas of women's higher education in Ireland. In 1902, at the time of the Robertson Royal Commission on University Education, she became the first president of the newly formed Irish Association of Women Graduates who presented a convincing case to the commission on the value of co-education in higher education.<sup>9</sup> She also contributed regular articles as Irish correspondent to *The Journal of Education*, published monthly in London. She died in 1907, living to see the final triumph of her TCD campaign in the admission of women in 1904, but College chose not to honour her.

One must ask why what was impossible in 1895 became possible for College ten years later. One reason was simply the passage of time, attitudes had become more liberal, the older men had passed on and the younger men in College like Mahaffy, Traill and Culverwell had gained more influence. Also the women's issue had become part of the much wider controversy regarding the restructuring of higher education in Ireland. A proposed national university of Ireland that would be acceptable to the Catholic Church for the higher education of lay Catholics, both men and women, was under consideration. Trinity was faced with the possibility of a Catholic college being placed along side TCD within the University of Dublin - proposal that College abhorred.

Therefore it was judicious to take the women students into the main College campus rather than recognizing a separate women's College such as Alexandra within the University of Dublin. Also TCD was much less confident than it had been in 1892 as the number of students had dropped, Irish cultural nationalism and the Gaelic revival were increasing, Sinn Fein had been founded, and the future of the Protestant Anglo Irish community and of the Union seemed much less secure.

Therefore when Mahaffy proposed in December 1902 that the College should now apply for a King's Letters Patent to allow the women to be legally admitted, there was little opposition from the Board though Provost Salmon remained adamantly opposed to the end. A request was sent to the Lord Lieutenant asking for clarification on the two terms 'Studiosi' and 'Studentes' as whether they could be considered generic nouns and thus include women. Later that year in 1903 the Provost received a letter from the government at Dublin Castle stating that the matter could not be resolved unless he the Provost gave his personal 'concurrence' to it, Salmon finally withdrew his official opposition, while making it clear he had not changed his views. He was by then an old man of eighty-three and he died in January 1904 just before the first women entered, so happily he did not live to see the 'ruination' of his College which he had served so well. College received notice of the King's Letter on the 16 January 1904.<sup>10</sup> The first young woman to enter was Isabel Marion Weir Johnston in January 1904 and Ellen Tuckey and Averina Shegog followed her later that year. Around forty women students entered in Michaelmas term 1904, and the first Lady Registrar, Miss Lucy Gwynn was appointed in Hilary Term 1905.

The women were admitted to degrees in Arts and medicine in College but were placed under strict social and collegiate restrictions, being denied residence, Foundation Scholarship, Fellowship, and Senior Common Room membership and dining rights. It was to take another sixty years for full equality to be granted and the Board's fears of 1895 took along time to disappear. Did the women do right to accept gratefully admission to the College without first obtaining equal rights? Both the women students and the small number of women staff, lost out by their exclusion from full membership of the College's academic and social community, It has been said that "Women were given full rights in the University but not in the College". Yet given the bitter battle of the 1890s, it probably seemed wise in 1904 to accept what was offered and to wait and work for the rest to be won at a later stage.

The decision to admit women to the TCD campus in 1904 was a courageous one by the Board, and it established the important principle of coeducation in Irish higher education. The decision undoubtedly influenced the establishment of the National University of Ireland in 1908 as a coeducational university in which women had full equality from the outset. Both the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge were influenced though they chose not admitted women to degrees until 1919 in Oxford and 1947 in the Cambridge. However in the three years 1904-07, the University of Dublin offered degrees 'ad eundem' to women from the Oxbridge colleges who had successfully completed their university examinations. Over 700 of these distinguished women, commonly known as the "Steamboat Ladies", became proud and grateful graduates of Dublin University, thus increasing pressure on their own universities to admit women. They also provided a shining example to the young Trinity women undergraduates as to what could be

achieved by able academic women, and the commencements fees of the Oxbridge women were used to establish Trinity Hall at Dartry as a women's hall of residence in 1908.<sup>11</sup>

Alice Oldham's contribution in the campaign for the higher education of women was fully recognized by her fellow women campaigners who admired her tenacity, her forthright approach, her administrative skills and her genuine scholarship. She believed wholeheartedly in the value of knowledge as a liberating force, and would not accept that it should be denied to women. It can be said that her zeal for the task and her blunt tactics hindered rather than helped her cause, and that she undoubtedly so antagonized the Board of College that they were glad to see the back of her. However without the long struggle in the 1890s that she had led with such determination, the decision of 1904 could well have been postponed for another fifteen years, it was as at Oxford. The generations of young women who have enjoyed and appreciate their academic, and social and political education on the coeducational Trinity campus, have every reason to honour the fighting and tireless spirit that was Alice Oldham, who refused to accept any less. She would be proud today of the achievements of TCD women and could rightly say (though I rather think she would just smile) 'I told you so a hundred years ago'.

I will leave the last word to a quote from Alice Oldham's obituary in *The Journal of Education*, February 1907:

Miss Oldham was widely known and greatly esteemed in Ireland. An effective advocate of the claims of women in all walks of life, she will be deservedly remembered for the splendid work which she rendered to the higher education of women....

... It is a pleasing thought that she had lived to see the complete realization of her great object of getting Trinity College and the University of Dublin opened to women on the same terms as to men. These are the achievements which do not die. It was done so quietly, so tactfully and unostentatiously that women of the present day who now enjoy all these privileges hardly realize what they owe to this fragile, gentle, unobtrusive, but most gifted woman'.<sup>12</sup>

Today, as we mark the centenary of the admission of women, we salute the memory of Alice Oldham and the other pioneer women of Irish higher education.

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<sup>1</sup> Deirdre Raftery & Susan M. Parkes, *Female education in Ireland, 1700-1900* (Dublin, 2007); Judith Harford, *The opening of university education to women in Ireland* (Dublin, 2008)

<sup>2</sup> Lucinda Thomson, 'The campaign for admission, 1870-1904' in Susan M. Parkes, *A Danger to the Men? a history of women in Trinity College, Dublin, 1904-2004* (Dublin, 1904), pp. 19-54.

<sup>3</sup> TCD Mun /P/1/2441(2).

<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to Dr Sean Barrett for giving me a copy of his 1998 Trinity Monday lecture on Dr J.K. Ingram.

<sup>5</sup> Susan M. Parkes (ed.), *A Danger to the Men? A History of Women in Trinity College Dublin, 1904-2004*, (Dublin, Lilliput Press, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> TCD Mun /P/1/2526(3).

<sup>7</sup> W.G. Brooke, *Statement of the Proceedings from 1892-95 in connection with the movement for the Admission of Women to TCD and correspondence in reference thereto*. (Dublin, 1895) p. 43.

<sup>8</sup> *Palles Commission on Intermediate education, Minutes of evidence*, p.462, HC 1899 (c.9512) xxiii.

<sup>9</sup> *Royal Commission on University education (Ireland), First report, Minutes of evidence*, pp. 218-21, HC 1902 (Cd.825-6) xxxi.

<sup>10</sup> TCD Mun/V/6/3, p 52.

<sup>11</sup> Susan M. Parkes, 'Trinity College, Dublin, and the Steamboat Ladies, 1904-07' in Mary R. Masson & Deborah Simonton, *Women and Higher Education, past, present and future* (Aberdeen, 1996), pp. 244-50.

<sup>12</sup> See also Anon., 'Obituary of Miss Alice Oldham', *English Women's Review*, 15 April 1907, quoted in Maria Luddy, *Women in Ireland, 1800-1918, a documentary history* (Cork, 1995), p.140.