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Reflections on the History and Identity of the Former Women's Colleges[1]

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Abstract

This paper will consider the various founding principles of the women's colleges at Oxford in the social and cultural context of their times: the secular and the religious variations; and the ways in which opposition to women's education in the late nineteenth century and onwards influenced the early conduct of these colleges. Academic recognition and high standards came to matter at least as much as the simple fact of providing a university education to this excluded part of the population. As Oxford colleges became co-educational in the third quarter of the twentieth century, the identity of the former women's colleges changed, and too often their public image suffered in relation to the perceived glamour and architectural splendour of the ancient colleges. And yet, in at least some cases, these colleges produced an exceptional roster of world-famous and nationally famous alumnae. The question of female fame will be addressed, along with some reflections on what the former women's colleges represent in modern Oxford, and whether they have a continuing special role.

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When I was invited by Daniel Valentine to speak at this conference, I was delighted to have the opportunity to make a contribution, and I felt that it would be a great pity if the history of the women's colleges did not have a place in the day's programme. I came up to Somerville to read History in the 1960s, and my friends and I all felt a sense of special privilege to have been offered places at what we believed to be one of the most famous women's colleges on the planet. (No doubt we were far too conceited.) At the time we arrived, it so happened that at that particular moment, the heads of all the women's colleges in both Oxford and Cambridge were Somervillians; and to eighteen-year-old freshers, that felt like part of the natural order. During my undergraduate years, Indira Gandhi became "our first prime minister", and the year before I arrived, the long-serving Somerville Fellow and Tutor Dorothy Hodgkin had become Britain's first woman scientist to win a Nobel Prize. While I know it is true that students applying to Oxford these days often have not heard of Somerville, I still feel in my bones that there is some disorder here. As Principal of Somerville, a historian by background and training but not at present an active scholar, my contribution today is offered as part of the framework in which you can think about the history of Oxford's colleges. I beg you to forgive me if this paper is less based on scholarly research than the others will be, and too, if there is occasionally a bit of a local bias. My final apology is that I will not be able to attend for the day, as I have to hurry back to college for a day commemorating the First World War, where our chief guest, Baroness Shirley Williams (Somerville, 1948) is leading a session discussing her mother Vera Brittain, also a Somervillian, the author of *Testament of Youth,* as part of a weekend in which we mark the centenary of the First World War.

One of the underlying questions at this conference has to be: "what is a college"? What does Oxford mean by a college? The question may seem too obvious to be posed to this audience, but it is a necessary starting point for my theme, which relates to the place of women in a collegiate university that had been shaped by men for over six hundred years before they gained their toe-hold of a place within it. Merton, which describes itself as the oldest self-governing college in the university, was founded by Walter de Merton in 1264 for twenty scholarly fellows, and did not admit undergraduates until well over a hundred years later. Some of the other ancient colleges had different patterns of foundation, and existed from the beginning to train students for the church or the law, and to support poor students with a range of scholarly, legal, clerical or public careers ahead of them. The community of scholarly fellows was at the heart of these early colleges, however, and that remains a common feature of college life throughout the university today. Each college's governing body is made up of Fellows, who are trustees of their college as an independent charity within the framework of the broader university. As any head of house will tell you, each governing body has its own views on the ethos of its college and its members guide the reputation and the financial, academic and social conduct of their college, in their capacity as trustees, with a sometimes fierce diligence. Student life at Oxford became an important feature of the university, certainly before the end of the fourteenth century when Merton admitted its first undergraduates; and it is one of the features of Oxford's history that the war between townspeople and students, sometimes erupting into violence, helped to shape the creation of the relatively protected colleges whose walls provided both shelter and a modicum of control over the high spirits of the younger generations. While

the college entity is described in legal terms generally as consisting of the Principal (or Master, Warden or other title) and Fellows, the distinctive personality of a college is also expressed by its students. For the many centuries of the University of Oxford's existence, its alumni have defined themselves at least as much by loyalty to their college as they have as graduates of the university.

It is no surprise therefore that in the third quarter of the nineteenth century when it was first mooted that women might have access to an Oxford education (and a few years earlier, to a Cambridge education), the pioneers of the Association for the Education of Women (the AEW) believed that the best way to achieve their aim was to create institutions, which at first they called halls, that would produce communities both academic and residential, that mimicked the existing men's colleges. The interesting exception to that view, the Society of Home Students which later became St Anne's, presented for several decades a standing challenge to the assumption that an Oxford education could only be delivered in a college. But since it was an implicit challenge, coming from the female margins, it seems not to have excited much existential debate within the collegiate university.

The second half of the nineteenth century has been defined by more than one historian as marking the "rise of respectability". It saw the beginnings of a breakthrough in the legal and social position of women in this country and in North America and Western Europe, but as we all know, each step along that path had to be contested. The underlying assumptions of Victorian society about the proper role of women dictated the way in which the women's colleges came into existence, and gave them only a precarious place in Oxford (as indeed was also true in Cambridge) until far into the twentieth century. Education for women was on the rise throughout Britain, with girls' schools being founded all over the country (Queen's College in Harley Street, London, in 1848, North London Collegiate School in 1850, and Cheltenham Ladies College in 1854 were the best known, but girls' schools in towns all over the UK had preceded them) and institutions of higher education in Manchester, London and elsewhere providing models for the pioneers at Cambridge and Oxford. In the two ancient universities, another force also contributed to the growth of opinion in favour of women's education, and that was the long-awaited progress towards religious freedom in Britain's ancient – and most unreconstructed- universities. When at last, in 1872, it became possible for people who were not professing members of the Church of England to be admitted to the university and moreover, for married men to hold professorships, the middle-class population of Oxford and Cambridge suddenly included an influential segment of young wives who sought an outlet for their own intellectual aspirations, for themselves and for their sisters and daughters. (It was a long-standing joke that the great building boom that produced the spacious family villas of North Oxford and its Cambridge equivalent was fuelled by the arrival in those towns of hitherto unacknowledged families who had been living quietly for years in the midlands.) The "Enabling Act" of 1876 technically gave the first statutory sanction to women entering universities.

The growing force of women's opinion and the rise in the number of men who supported them were features of Victorian middle-class progressivism. There were still powerful voices

raised against women's education, and many nuances of view even among those who favoured some liberalisation. The newspaper press carried plenty of opinion pieces condemning women's education, and there were respected scientists who claimed to have proved that developing women's brains damaged them physically for the natural duties of their sex, viz. motherhood and presumably, knitting and darning and cooking. Prevailing social norms required that women should be seen as demure and compliant. They needed to be protected from male ardour, and men in turn needed to be protected from the temptations of young women at close proximity. Jane Robinson's book *Bluestockings* quotes Dr Henry Maudsley's article in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1874:

> *…it is not that girls have not ambition, nor that they fail generally to run the intellectual race that is set before them, but it is asserted that they do it at a cost to their strength and health which entails lifelong suffering and even incapacitates them for the adequate performance of the natural functions of their sex…It would be an ill thing, if it should so happen, that we got the advantages of a quantity of female intellectual work at the price of a puny, enfeebled and sickly race.*

In such a climate, the founders of the women's colleges at Oxford were naturally wary of exciting too much attention, and anxious that their young ladies should conduct themselves with the utmost propriety and discretion. The women's colleges were built at a demure distance from the central colleges of the University, not only because land in the centre of Oxford was difficult to find, but in order to put a suitable distance between the young women and the young men. Lady Margaret Hall, founded in 1878 and opened in 1879, established itself in beautiful grounds beside the river, separated by the University Parks from the fleshpots of central Oxford. Somerville Hall, now College, which in fact is the most central of the former women's colleges, also opened its doors in 1879, in Walton Manor House. It was approached along a leafy and obscure avenue behind a brewery on Woodstock Road, and safely separated from the ecclesiastical masculinity of the flashy new Keble College, which might be only five minutes away on foot, but was a whole world away spiritually and socially. Coming later, in 1886 and 1893 respectively, St Hugh's and St Hilda's occupied sites at the further edges of the city; also respectably distant, but with the inestimable advantage, which they share with LMH, of being surrounded by spacious grounds of great natural beauty. For several decades, women at Oxford were required to take a chaperone with them when attending a lecture at which young men would be present. In the earliest years, they were taught entirely separately; and for many years they were debarred from entering the libraries of the university except by giving notice of their intention, and taking a chaperone with them. This disadvantage, like the need to establish a respectable distance, also brought benefits; for the former women's colleges in general possess to this day notably good libraries, built up by necessity to provide for their students' academic needs.

In all those respects, the women's colleges (as the halls came to call themselves) shared a geographical separateness, as well as an ethos and a way of conducting themselves that was dictated by the norms of their day. In other ways, they developed strikingly different identities from the first. The Association for the Education of Women, progressive and forward-looking as it was, nevertheless splintered into two factions over the issue of religion: the great dividing

issue of the nineteenth century and onwards. Lady Margaret Hall became the college of the Anglican establishment, named for Lady Margaret Beaufort the mother of King Henry VII and an emblem of devotion to both learning and religion. The founders of the other women's college, out there behind the brewery on Woodstock Road, wanted a secular name and wished their institution to be open to women of any religion and none: truly non-denominational, although in the end the more thorough-going secularists among them were forced to agree to the college hosting Christian prayers.

They hit upon the name of Mary Somerville, who had died in 1872 shortly before her ninety-second birthday, celebrated as the best known woman scientist of her day. She was a renowned writer of important translations and books about science, an honorary member of the Royal Society (which of course at that date did not admit women to the fellowship), a distinguished mathematician and astronomer in her own right, who had had to beg and borrow her education from her brother's tutor and then from her own experimentations and voracious reading. If you have seen the new film *Mr Turner*, you may recall the cameo portrayal of this soft-spoken Scottish lady who visits Turner's studio to give him a demonstration of the refraction of light through a prism. Mary Somerville was celebrated by the great scientists of her day, admired by Charles Darwin, and invited by John Stuart Mill to be the leading signatory of his parliamentary petition for votes for women, presented in 1868. She was also unimpeachably respectable and accomplished in the way of upper-middle-class ladies: a wife and mother, a good artist and a good pianist; a role model in fact, for the women of the college that was named after her. Very recently, the historian Richard Holmes has published a review of Mary Somerville's work in *Nature*, where he extols her ground-breaking role as the first writer on science to provide a systematic set of explanations, and the most influential person in coining the term "scientist". Apart from a couple of short biographies and this recent article, however, her fame did not survive her own long life by many years. The great Mary Somerville, whose name meant so much to the founders of the college, is now an obscure and unknown presence in a couple of portraits in the college: and I make it my mission in welcoming our first-year undergraduates, to tell them just a bit about their presiding genius, a woman who did in fact change the way people see the world.

Another model altogether for women in Oxford was supplied, also in 1879, by the Society of Home Students. According to the web site of St Anne's College, its modern incarnation, the Society "was a manifesto rather than a location", the "work of a coalition of radical Victorian women and men who determined that there should be a way for women to study at Oxford University without having to be immersed in a college at all." The experiment perished eventually because of the shortage of rentable rooms for female students in Oxford, and reinvented itself, first as the St Anne's Society and then as a full college in 1952. By the time it invested seriously in property and buildings, the opportunities were limited, but it is notable that the modern St Anne's, despite its constrained site and in total contrast to its founding principle, provides accommodation for all its students. A century after embarking on the experiment of providing an Oxford education outside the residential confines of a college, St Anne's admitted its first male students; and in many ways it can boast the most flexible self-transforming history of all the former women's colleges.

The experiment of women's colleges at Oxford caught on. St Hugh's opened its doors in 1886 (a century before becoming a mixed college for women and men); founded by Elizabeth Wordsworth, whose father was a bishop of Lincoln and who named her foundation after St Hugh of Avalon, an earlier bishop of Lincoln. St Hilda's, named for the Anglo-Saxon Saint Hilda of Whitby, came next, founded in 1893 by Dorothea Beale who had established Cheltenham Ladies' College in 1854. In a Founder's Day address in 2006, the St Hilda's fellow, historian Dr Jenny Wormald reflected, with tongue in cheek,

> *We are very fortunate in and can be very proud of our college name; Miss Beale chose well. She did not aim quite for the top, as the founders of Jesus, Trinity and Christchurch did. And there are, of course, other colleges named after saints. But if we look at them, and more particularly the women's - now former - women's colleges, we can still feel good. St Anne's and St Hugh's may have their point, but which St Anne, which St Hugh? Somerville, of course, doesn't have a saint at all; but it is named after the remarkable 19th century scholar and strong exponent of women's education, Mary Somerville; and as she was a Scot, that, in my book, is just about as good. Even so, I would far rather have St Hilda than even Mary Somerville, let alone the tough-minded but dreary and humourless Lady Margaret Beaufort from whom LMH gets its name. And even among the Oxbridge saints, Hilda stands out. For she was very formidable indeed, but imbued with infinite grace, and someone who has something very particular and special to offer.*

The friendly rivalry between the former women's colleges and their patron saints is an echo of the rivalry between all Oxford colleges, part of the fabric of Oxford life and also a reflection of that sense of identity which helps to bind our communities together.

In the time remaining for this talk, I will turn now to some of the defining personalities and events of my own college, Somerville, by way of offering some further reflections on the identity of at least one former women's college, and with a return to the modern identities of the other colleges, posing some more general questions along the way.

The First World War was a turning point in the role and public perceptions of women in this country. Somerville played a distinctive part, and offers some insights into how that transformation affected Oxford.

'Oxford versus War' and 'Learning versus Life', wrote Vera Brittain of her college days in her autobiography *Testament of Youth*, an elegy for the lost generation of World War I. She arrived in Somerville College in the autumn of 1914, in a tumultuous world far different from her tranquil childhood. 'I live in an atmosphere of exhilaration, half delightful, half disturbing, wholly exciting' she wrote in her diary at the beginning of her first term. She had won an exhibition and, as she put it, 'tried to forget the war'. She laboured over Greek verbs, joined the Oxford Society for Women's Suffrage, and made friends; she took an immediate liking to Dorothy Sayers, a third-year undergraduate, who would become famous for *Gaudy Night*, the crime novel set in a thinly disguised version of Somerville.

But life in College was soon interrupted, for in April 1915, the War Office requisitioned Somerville as a military hospital. In an 'emergency migration', the students relocated to Oriel for the duration of the war. The move was something of an adventure for both students and

fellows. The *Oxford Magazine* noted that a former dean of Oriel 'must be turning in his grave' at the thought of females in the College. Brittain, who felt the war had made student life 'more elevated & less petty', was positive about going to a men's college and wrote of the 'dusty old dons and proctors', who criticized Oriel for taking us in. 'One realizes at such times the value of men who have sufficient imagination and far-sightedness to be feminists. On the day we come into our own the dons and proctors won't be shown much mercy!' Such views reflected the fragility of female education at Oxford, where chaperones were still widely in use and the University denied degrees to women.

The Principal of Somerville, Miss Emily Penrose, saw an opportunity in the transition to an ancient men's college, for it suggested the progress that female students had made in the university. To her, it was an historic event that required individual Somervillians to show character and intellectual mettle in the cause of women's higher education. The weekly magazine *London Opinion* took a less serious view:

A hundred wounded soldiers fill
(In days like these one might have feared it)
The pleasant haunts of Somerville
For Kitchener has commandeered it!

But, driven from their loved abodes,
The learned ladies find a corner
Where once was sheltered Cecil Rhodes,
Clough, Matthew Arnold, PF Warner!

Vera Brittain's own experience turned soon to deep tragedy, as chronicled in *Testament of Youth*; and Somerville the college housed many personal histories and tragedies in its incarnation as a hospital, including the poets Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves, who wrote some fine poems while recuperating there. It was in no small part owing to the war work of thousands of women including Vera Brittain, that in 1918 the Representation of the People Act finally granted the vote to women over the age of thirty – a full fifty years after Mill's petition, headed by Mary Somerville's signature. In 1920, the University of Oxford granted women the right to take the degrees that they had earned over decades of doggedly sitting the same examinations as the men, without the rewards of recognition. It was, sadly, only seven years after that landmark, in 1927, that the university decided to place a cap on the numbers of women permitted to study at Oxford: a limitation that was only lifted thirty years later.

My next episode in Somerville's history concerns our one and only Nobel Prize-winner, the great crystallographer Professor Dorothy Hodgkin, who solved the structures of penicillin, Vitamin B12 and insulin. We have been celebrating in the past month the fiftieth anniversary of her Nobel Prize. It remains a puzzle, and in some ways all the more of a testament to her genius, that no other British woman (and precious few women of any nationality) have yet attained that particular pinnacle. Dorothy Hodgkin's achievements as a scientist were accompanied by a profound social conscience and deep political convictions. Like Vera

Brittain before her, though in a rather different mould, she became a great campaigner for peace, using her fame to advocate for international nuclear disarmament, and co-founding the Operation Pugwash campaign. She was also a quiet feminist. She herself was the first woman in Oxford to receive paid maternity leave (three times over): the inspired gift of the then Principal of Somerville, Helen Darbishire, who recognized that this brilliant young scientist must not be allowed to give up. Later on, Professor Hodgkin gave part of her Nobel Prize money to Somerville to support the establishment of the college nursery.

My next and final episode from Somerville's history concerns Dorothy Hodgkin's pupil who read Chemistry at Somerville from 1943 to 1947, Margaret Thatcher. Mrs Thatcher made her way at Oxford thanks in part to a bursary discreetly bestowed on her by the Principal when she discovered that there was this undergraduate in financial need. Thanks to this support, the young Margaret Roberts was able to lead a reasonable social life at Oxford, joined the Bach Choir and then also the Conservative Association – and the rest, as they say, is history. Her first job was as a research scientist, and she was always very proud of the fact that she was the first Prime Minister of Britain to have been trained as a scientist. She held her tutor, Dorothy Hodgkin, in awe; and Professor Hodgkin for her part, despite her polar opposite political views, took the time to visit the Prime Minister on several, if not many occasions to bend her ear on the subject of nuclear disarmament. Margaret Thatcher's long-term adviser and chief of staff Lord Powell recalls how his boss used to be in a fright for days ahead of one of these visits, and would read up on current science as though for a tutorial. It is a story I tell occasionally to students, as an example of the way two people each of whom had reached the topmost heights of her profession, could listen with respect to each other, across and in spite of a great political gulf. I am tempted to pose the question whether the same would be true of male politicians and their tutors, but that may be unfair.

Somerville College is well endowed with illustrious alumnae: two prime ministers, a founder of a the Liberal Democrats, Britain's only female Nobel prizewinner in science, and some of the best known writers of the twentieth century: in the 1990s not long after the college finally became co-educational, our then librarian counted up to seventy published novelists who had studied at Somerville, and they ranged from Rose Macaulay to Dorothy Sayers, Vera Brittain, Winifred Holtby, Margaret Kennedy, Penelope Fitzgerald, Iris Murdoch, and AS Byatt. We can boast the first woman ambassador from this country, followed by a string of others, and some great medical pioneers. Daphne Park, Principal in the 1980s, was the top-ranking woman in the security services in her day, and became known as the "queen of spies". The list could be extended indefinitely, and in all fields the tradition continues: MPs and junior ministers, brilliant scientists, successful diplomats and scores of well-respected writers and academics. A former Warden of Merton tells me she believes we can boast a longer list of well-known twentieth-century alumni than any other Oxford college. And yet here is a college of which, these days, many people have not heard before they come to Oxford. The epithet "formidable Somervillian" can still be applied, but it resonates in a diminishing circle. What is it about female fame that fails to make a more permanent impression? Perhaps St Hugh's College's

most famous alumna and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, Aung San Suu Kyi, breaks that mould.

I will close with a few quotations from the web sites of the former women's colleges, and leave you with the puzzle of why our collective record does not translate into a more brightly shining identity:
St Anne's calls itself "a down-to-earth, friendly and independent-minded college that takes people for what they are. It is modern in its outlook and architecture, and open to the world."

LMH was founded, it tells us, "from a passion for scholarship, equality and fairness". Their introductory note goes on: "We are heirs to an educational vision that took the quality of living and studying facilities and the sheer beauty of the natural and built environment as seriously as it took scholarship and formal education". The college's mission is "to benefit society by the advancement of knowledge and understanding through excellence in education and research as a College of the University of Oxford."

St Hilda's "is committed to excellence and equality, fostering intellectual and personal achievement in an environment where every voice matters." The college was an avowedly Church of England foundation.

St Hugh's, meanwhile, "is a college of Oxford University. We aim to admit the brightest students, women and men, regardless of their educational, social or ethnic background. We believe that St Hugh's provides both excellent teaching, and a supportive environment in which students can develop their own skills. From its beautiful site in North Oxford, the College promotes a thriving culture of research and intellectual engagement, as well as the artistic, musical and sporting activities that make it such an exciting place to live and study"…

Is it that, in promoting the virtues of being down to earth, nurturing, friendly, tolerant and diverse, we obscure the virtues of academic excellence and aspiration? And if so, is that not in itself a distinctive feature? Perhaps we just need to persuade our potential publics to take a closer look. The Somerville web site, after all, cries out: "If you want to change the world, come to Somerville"

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