

Commemoration address 2018 – Joanna Innes

Somervillians tend to be long-lived. Though of course there are exceptions, today we have no tragically young exceptions – and therefore also no men. We are commemorating the era of Somerville for Women. The youngest Somervillian we commemorate died at the age of 62, the second youngest at 68. By modern standards, these were lives cut short – these were my contemporaries -- and we regret their early deaths. However, out of 48, two had passed their hundredth birthday: they matriculated in 1934 and 35. 21 others had passed their 90th. Altogether almost half of those we commemorate died aged over 90, all but 6, over 80.

This is to consider them at death; what does it mean for their lives? Not all were students of the college: Judith Gray was a lecturer, and Denise O'Donnell was domestic bursar. But all the rest were students, and among these almost all matriculated immediately before or during the Second World War or during a decade or so after the war: between 1937 and 1957. If they entered the labour market, as most did, that was chiefly between the 1940s and 60s. Taken together, their lives give us insight into a substantial cohort of Somerville women.

We know about most of these deaths because family or friends have notified us. In this period, the college was admitting initially about 50, by the end about 75 undergraduates a year, plus a handful 'advanced students'. We know probably about the deaths of about three quarters of the undergraduates, fewer of the graduate students. We don't necessarily have a representative sample (that's the anxious historian speaking). But it's striking, I think, that we do know about so many, suggestive of the ways in which the college as a community continues to have meaning for its former members. Many of those we are commemorating attended college events; many were supporters and some have left legacies. Margaret Stewart, née Adams – we very recently learnt – has left us a munificent legacy, though we learnt about her death too late to establish much about her life, so she won't figure further in this account; we hope to commemorate her more properly next year. Among supporters of the college Diana (known as Danny) Brown also merits special mention, because she served as chair of the Somerville appeal in the early days of college fundraising. A sense of meaningful connection, sustained in a variety of sometimes invisible ways, has in some instances been reinforced by further family connections: at least five we commemorate today (*Brown Mallory/Neville Rolfe. Parham. Sayer. Toynbee*) have Somervillian relatives who join us to remember them. Friendships between Somervillians, sustained throughout life, have brought others of you to us. And of course we warmly welcome also those whose only connection to the college is through the people we meet to commemorate.

The Somervillians we commemorate today don't form a sample in any statistical sense. Yet they seem *fairly* representative of their generations. Just under a quarter read science and maths. This fits quite well with what our librarians tell me: that is, that between 1937 and 1957, the proportion of Somervillians reading maths and science climbed from about one fifth to over one third. The first scientific Principal, Janet Vaughan, was elected in 1945; in the 1950s, more science tutors were hired. But if science numbers grew notably, continuity was represented above all by Humanities. The most popular subject read by those we commemorate was English – as many read English as all sciences and maths; almost as large a number read History. Next came Lit Hum and Modern Languages. By contrast only two read PPE and only one changed to Law. These last subjects seem underrepresented in our group, even though only some 10% of Somervillians read them at this time.

Advanced students are probably also underrepresented, though we do commemorate Leticia Mukasa, later Kikonyogo, who took a Diploma in Social Anthropology. There's some hint in

the college history that, then as now, advanced students were more likely to come from outside Britain. Janet Vaughan said that she liked to have them in college not least because they were usually going back to important jobs in their own country. Leticia Kikonyogo, indeed, was Uganda's first female magistrate; she ended her career as Deputy Chief Justice. She was also a vigorous sponsor of charities relating to women and children, and a devout Catholic, whose piety and distinction were recognised when she became one of the first women to be made a papal dame.

Of course, there were women from outside Britain among the undergraduates too – including Americans who had taken degrees in their own country, who came to Oxford to complete so-called 'second BAs'. One of those, graduating in 1960, was Miriam Dressler from New York who already had two degrees, one a Radcliffe MA. She went on to do a doctorate in Oxford and, having married Jasper Griffin, returned to Somerville as the college's ancient history tutor in 1967. We'll commemorate her distinguished career and her contribution to the life of the college at a memorial service in the autumn.

Miriam was typical of Oxford women of this period in marrying, and fairly typical in marrying an Oxford man. The *History of the University* reports that the proportion of women graduates known to have married continued to rise from its original low base, reaching 84% by the 1950s – around half marrying Oxford men. This is about the proportion of our women who married – therefore a bit higher than we might have expected, because our group includes an earlier cohort. Some of our Somervillians developed relationships with future husbands while they were students, though I think more report meeting them through work (though the husbands met through work may of course have been Oxford graduates too; the husband of Shirley Mair, later Carnell, reports using 'Weren't you at Oxford' as a chat-up line.)

(Incidentally, this propensity to marry presents me with a problem: most of the women I'll be talking about went by one name as students, at least one other in married life. Rather than switch back and forth, or extend the litany of names by giving all names, hereafter I'll consistently use the names these women bore at the end of their lives).

So, the trend was towards marriage for graduate women. But a converse trend, as reported in the University's *History*, was that such women were *decreasingly* likely to devote their lives wholly to family roles or voluntary work -- though 'the lifecycles of graduates of the 1940s and 1950s commonly included a career break as full-time wife and mother'. The implication, important for much of the rest of what I have to say, is that we're into a generation of working mothers. Among the occupations women graduates followed, the University *History* reports that education remained by far the most common, trailed at some distance by government, the professions, research, industry and secretarial. Women were most likely to hold government jobs in the war years, and only then did significant numbers serve in the armed forces.

The women we're commemorating experienced the war at various ages. Anne Treisman, who later read psychology, was a child in the pathway of V1 bombs, 'doodlebugs'; she and her sister included doodlebugs in the sky in all their childhood drawings. Others were evacuated, or had their education interrupted by war. Some studied in wartime Oxford and remember rationing: Sheila Harris remembered going to a cake factory to queue for cakes. Some did war service before or after they came to Oxford: Barbara Mitchell learned to drive a tractor as a Land Girl. Some worked at Bletchley Park (Jo Sayer, Jacqueline Woodfill) or served in the Wrens (like Mairi McCormick) or did both (thus, Kisty Creighton and Rosalind Page – who tragically lost both a fiancé and a brother in the war). Ann Whitaker, caught studying in Berne when war broke out, worked as secretary to the air attaché at the British Legation,

found a route back to England and then served with the WRAF in Italy and North Africa. Nancy Bower resisted the lure of GCHQ and went to teach in London, setting her pupils to singing in air raid shelters. Eileen Leonard joined the civil service, but was denied a permanent job on the grounds that current staffing reflected wartime conditions; at the end of the war, she was turned off to make way for returning men. (So we see why the numbers of women in government dropped off post war).

It's to such details of individual lives that we need to turn to add human warmth to the statistical matrix – which of course extracts just a few indicators from the rich diversity of these women's lived experiences, the constraints they operated under and the opportunities they enjoyed; their choices; their frustrations and sorrows, and their successes and satisfactions.

As I've read the accounts of lives that we've been sent, two recurrent themes have struck me: adaptability and public spiritedness.

Only 8 of the 43 who came to Somerville as undergraduates (that is, between one in five and one in six) pursued careers in the most straightforward sense: training for something early in life and practising it thereafter, proceeding through hierarchies of advancement. These careers were first in school teaching: in the case of Tamsyn Imison, who combined vigorous leadership of Hampstead School with campaigning to promote her vision of effective teaching and school leadership: her efforts were recognised when she was made a Dame. Kay Davies began teaching in a school, then became principal of two teacher-training colleges: the Froebel Institute, Roehampton (now part of the University of Roehampton), and Wall Hall College, Watford (now part of the University of Hertfordshire). Several pursued careers in universities: thus Miriam Griffin (already mentioned), and Barbara Mitchell, who became a respected Greek historian and tutor at St Anne's College. Also science or medicine, in the case of Felicity Edwards, who ultimately specialised in occupational medicine and was awarded an OBE; Pauline Topham, who originally read French, came to think that it was a higher priority to feed the world, retrained in science and pursued a fulfilling career with the Scottish Crop Research Institute; and Margaret Wright, who specialised in paediatrics and child psychiatry. Ann Treisman, who read psychology, and returned later as a lecturer, then pursued a distinguished academic career in the States, so she was both an academic and a scientist. She was made a fellow of the Royal Society in 1989, and in 2013 was honoured, for her paradigm-setting research, with the award of the American National Medicine of Science. Some of these women were unmarried (*Davies, Topham*); but most married – Tamsyn Imison was indeed sent down from Oxford on the grounds that having married she wouldn't have time to study. A notable fraction of the married had husbands in similar lines of work, which may have made life easier (*thus Felicity Edwards, Miriam Griffin, Barbara Mitchell, and Margaret Wright*). Ann Treisman first worked in North America with her first husband, then married another American academic; her four children, she said, 'graciously allowed me to work without exhibiting too many signs of neglect'.

All but one of the women who received significant public honours had such fairly straightforward careers – the partial exception being Maureen Birurowska, who experimented with various lines of work early in life (of which more shortly), but ultimately settled down as secretary to the National Environment Research Council. During her last five years before retirement, she worked for the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution. Her labours were recognised with an MBE.

Others among our Somervillians followed a fairly consistent line of activity amounting to a career: Marjorie Boulton was a teacher and writer with a passion, formed in college, for Esperanto; in 2008 she was nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature for her Esperanto

poetry; Sarah Canning inherited a girls' school, which she ran with an emphasis on the role of riding in forming character; these women never married. Hilary Bryson moved to Northern Ireland with her husband, studied with artists there and worked as a painter, producing portraits by commission, and using skills from her Zoology degree in animal paintings. Yet her obituarist notes that 'Domestic commitments and three young daughters were necessarily restrictive of an artistic career.' She did not exhibit much until late in life.

Much more characteristically, the women we are commemorating changed course during their working lives, or interrupted them, perhaps changing direction afterwards. Of course, changes of direction in work are not peculiar to women. Philip Kreager's 2013 study of Oxford humanities graduates entering work between 1960 and 1989, in what one might have thought would have been the golden age of 'careers' for both men and women, found changes of direction were common among both; he argued on that basis that what graduates need above all are transferrable skills and the ability to adapt.

Some of our Somervillians just decided to change: Maureen Birukowska's early experiments included two years at the Wright-Fleming Institute of Microbiology before she decided that this wasn't for her and became an assistant education officer at London Zoo. She spent five years working for the British Council in London, and aspired to work abroad, until she realised that 'women under forty were not sent overseas unless qualified to teach English as a foreign language', at which she took her fortune into her own hands, and made her own arrangements to teach English in Sweden. Judith Lovelace worked in personnel at the GLC, but rebelled when equalities were removed from her remit, switching to careers counselling; Clare Toynbee was working as a publisher's reader, screening unpublishable novels, when she was offered more interesting work as a researcher for Radio 2, initially on the Jimmy Young programme. She was to continue in that line of work for the rest of her working life. One producer wrote about her 'for years afterwards I would recommend that aspiring producers and researchers look at [the] quality [of her work].' Rebecca Whitaker, after reading PPE, trained as a medical social worker, but switched track alongside a doctor with whom she had worked closely on projects around the young and sick; together they founded a Christian school in Cornwall.

But changes in our Somervillians' working lives were most often associated with adaptations to fit in with their husband's movements, or with care of children. Many though not all of the significant majority who married had children. Sheila Ormerod wrote 'I think we were a generation brainwashed into the idea of devoting its life to have a family... Obviously this was the normal social reaction to loss of life during the war' (that's a former history student reflecting).

Three quarters of those who married, many of whom had children, continued to work, or resumed work after a gap. But they adapted to fit in with their husbands, and with child care. Marriage could present exciting new opportunities: Danny Brown had been teaching for many years when she met the man who was to be her second husband; she joined him in setting up a successful computer-systems business; then, after both were seriously injured in a road accident, they became activists for population control and women's reproductive rights. (Just to offset the various kinds of Christian I'm celebrating in this address, I should say she was the most committed of the several humanists in the group. A member of the Humanist Society at University, she was later one of the most active contributors to the Internet Infidels Discussion Board, and a founder member of the on-line Secular Café.) Margaret Kohl's life took an unplanned turn when she met her future husband at a friend's wedding. She moved to Heidelberg with him, taught English at Ludwig Maximilian Universität in Munich, then joined the publishing arm of the German corporation Allianz as a

translator; she gained renown as the trusted translator of the influential German theologian Jürgen Moltmann.

Others made do and mended. Shirley Carnell moved around with her management-accountant husband, abandoning her original career in social work to teach in Hong Kong and Cheshire, before returning, late in life, to social work. Joan Christodoulou went with her husband, whom she'd met in Oxford, to Tanganyika, where he was developing infrastructure, then back with him to England as he followed a career in university administration, ultimately at the Open University; she became an Open University tutor, as well as studying for an Open University master's degree herself, and was active in the Milton Keynes development corporation. Virginia Holt, having 'breezed through' the civil service exams, left on marriage, then worked with community groups, for the prison service, and, after her marriage broke up, on Fife Councils, then finally in the Scottish Office on the reorganisation of local government. Fanny Mallary met her future husband when she was working in Sothebys New York. She later worked cataloguing manuscripts, as the editor of a local paper, and finally achieved renown in her own right as a historical novelist. Jo Sayer moved to London with her husband so he could complete his medical degree; abandoned postgraduate studies in biochemistry when her children were born, and worked as a school bursar and school secretary; in this latter capacity she helped to put together a new maths text. Mavis Ward, who read chemistry and assisted Dorothy Hodgkin, moved to Manchester with her husband when he worked in chambers there, and got a job with a company within ICI; stopped work when her children were born, then resumed it when her marriage broke up, working for UMIST labs. Once bitten twice shy, when she acquired a new partner, though they ultimately moved in together they never married and retained separate rooms. I think you'll agree that these were multi-talented, adaptable women.

Not all conceded so much to their husbands. Jenny Bell pursued her own career as a teacher in London while her husband worked in Northern Ireland; when he retired to Oxford, she joined him in her own time. Many, though they embraced competing demands, still found them a challenge. Mairi McCormick, in her late memoir, *Clearances*, chronicled her struggles to reconcile her roles as wife, mother and daughter and the work that she took on opportunistically as 'advertising copywriter, university lecturer, editor, museum secretary, ghost-writer and general stooge' with her true vocation, as a poet. She said that it was only when she was old that her life and the poetry 'went along together'.

This context helps to explain the appeal of teaching as an occupation. True, teaching was a common destination for men too: the *History of the University* tells us that it attracted least a quarter of male graduates throughout the period. And teaching was sometimes a vehicle for idealism. Of the women we're commemorating, Jenny Bell, Phyllis Boardman and Marian McKellar taught English in Africa – in Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa – in an interesting and hopeful era of Africa's history. Marian McKellar also taught Hungarians who had fled abroad after the Russian invasion in 1956, and later other immigrants to Britain. Some, having started teaching their degree subject, later found opportunities to teach their private passions: Marjorie Boulton taught English but also Esperanto courses; Sheila Harris, a committed Christadelphian, having gained an external Bachelor of Divinity, shifted from teaching classics to RE. Still, women went into teaching in greater proportions than men; across the University, about 40% of the 1940s cohort went into teaching, rising thereafter to 50%. This surely had something to do with teaching's sheer functionality for those who needed to be adaptable, and often to combine work with the care of their own school-age children. The rise in the proportions teaching after the war may have reflected narrowing of women's opportunities, but probably also pragmatic calculation on the part of all those working mothers.

What of those who dropped out of paid employment entirely after marriage or childbearing: how did they feel about or look back on the course they took? Some seem to have luxuriated in it, appreciating the chance to cultivate the art of living. Judy Gray pursued literary and musical interests, and did a part-time master's in Music Analysis. Ursula Mullard engaged in amateur theatricals, then ran her own theatre production company. Elizabeth Murray worked on the small farm in New England where she lived with her husband and was active in conservation. Christian Parham followed her husband, who worked for Barclays, to Kenya and then to Jerusalem, learnt some Swahili and more seriously studied Hebrew. Pam Mason was doing volunteer work with war-wounded when she met her future husband, an army psychiatrist. After marriage, with children, she led an active life involving travel, skating, making clothes, cooking, and music. She did voluntary work with the Royal Medical Benevolent Fund, and was their chairman for two years. Yet she said that she regretted not having had a career. Several accounts of women who left employment on marriage brood on their state of mind. Kisty Creighton, who was an avid gardener, and who edited her grandmother's diaries for publication, is described as 'not straightforward, always self-conscious and self-critical.' According to her children, Pamela Haynes took seriously her responsibilities as a vicar's wife, but felt some frustration. In her 'there was undeniably a sharp mind, along with a searing sense of justice for others, an unruly nature and a thirst for knowledge always in evidence', which left its mark on her children. Conscious that most of their Somerville contemporaries had spent a large part of their lives in employment, and that younger women were increasingly paralleling male career paths, such women could be pushed on to the defensive.

Still, I think we miss something if we divide up these women only, as I have done so far, in terms of whether they pursued careers, spent adaptable lives in employment or turned away from paid work. I said that two themes had struck me, and if one was adaptability, the other was public-spiritedness. When the women whom we're commemorating today left Oxford none were heading for corporate careers, or careers in the City (at a time when, by contrast, those professions had come to attract around a fifth of male graduates). Insofar as they pursued anything like ideal-type careers, women did so in fields like education, science or medicine: they spent what in the broadest sense could be described as lives of public service. If we put the ideals inspiring these women's lives to the fore, the categories that I've used so far begin to blur. And the more so when the once-employed women moved into retirement – and many of them spent many years in retirement, if they were lucky before the onset of ill-health and decline. From that point all these lives tend to exhibit a similar mix of good living and good causes, perhaps combined with late study. Some combined ill-health and good causes: Pauline Topham, whose switch from French to Crop Research Institute I mentioned earlier, had sight problems over a long period, but was active in various support organisations, including latterly serving as Chairman of the Ladies Club of the Dundee Society for the Visually Impaired.

Let me leave you with Hazel Hoffman's remark, from the report of the year of 1943, on what the college meant to her: 'Somerville was a revelation, all those brilliant and erudite and above all *good* women'.

Published sources: Pauline Adams, *Somerville for Women* (Oxford, 1996); Brian Harrison ed. *The History of the University of Oxford, vol VIII, The Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1994); Philip Kreager, *Humanities Graduates and the British Economy* (Univ. of Oxford, 2013).