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Small Steps, Loud Voices: The Fight for Equal Education in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

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Abstract

My current research has led me to several different archives, most notably the ones held by Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums. I discovered the diary of Mary Jean Wilson the eldest child of George Washington Wilson whose photographic firm was once the largest supplier of topographical views in Britain. This diary was written between January-November 1897 and provides a unique insight into the mind and consciousness of a middle-class Victorian woman; not only through Jeanie's entries but also in the newspaper clippings she pasted into its pages. I was also able to draw upon other sources such as the Reminiscences of Old Aberdeen by Katherine Trail to build a broader picture of what it was like for women who wanted to expand their horizons in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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INTRODUCTION

“In nothing is the change so evident as in the position of women. They are now recognized as citizens... training themselves... to keep pace with their brothers... that when their time comes, they will be ready to prove themselves... and to do their share in making this world a better and sweeter place” (Trail, 1932: 128).

While the Victorian Era gave rise to the development of the arts and science, it also bore witness to a new category within society- the middle class. Members of middle-class families were wealthy, and the women of these families often sought to broaden their career opportunities through academic aspirations. The LLA or Lady Literate in Arts qualification originated in 1877 at the University of St. Andrews. The LLA permitted women to take courses in the arts and in languages and science. The above quotation is from Katherine Trail’s *Reminiscences of Old Aberdeen* and summarises the position of women’s education by the early 1930s. Comparatively, Mary Jean Wilson’s diary gives a unique perspective, not only from the point of view of a middle-class Victorian woman, but also on what she considered to be the most important issues in society at that time. She kept the diary from January to November 1897 which contains not only her own thoughts, but also newspaper clippings about local and global news. From her diary I was able to ascertain what she liked to do in her daily life; her interests, hobbies and intimate thoughts about the fragility of her own mortality. What is also notable about her diary, is that it challenges common stereotypes about unmarried women in the nineteenth century. There is a misconception that unmarried women led boring uneventful lives as lonely spinsters which, after having read this diary, has changed my own perspective on the subject.

Lady Literate in Arts

Mary Jean Wilson, or ‘Jeanie’ as she was known to her family, was born in Aberdeen in 1850. She was the eldest child of photographer George Washington Wilson and his wife Maria Ann Wilson (*nee* Cassie). Little is known of her early childhood however, as an adult she earned her LLA, *Lady Literate in Arts* qualification. She enrolled in 1877 and in 1882 had received an Honours in French and Physiology. By 1883 she had earned her LLA after taking her examinations in

Aberdeen resulting in a Pass in German and an Honours in Geology (University of St Andrews, 1877-1883). Jeanie would often help her father at his photographic firm by translating letters and journals received from all over the globe. Family friend George Walker (1855:256) describes her as very talented “who scans all the foreign journals, translating anything that is likely to be of service to her father.” Her passion for languages is supported in the pages of her diary where she writes fluently in both German and French; listing her favourite authors, Charles Nodier and Auguste Bachelin.

In 1877, eight women enrolled in the first LLA course in St. Andrews and that number increased year on year so that it became necessary to open new examinations centres in other cities. It must be noted that no teaching was provided by the University of St. Andrews, Smith (2014) explains that “students were responsible for their own preparation.” The LLA was designed to be available to as many women as possible regardless of geographical origin. In Aberdeen, examinations began in 1882, so presumably Jeanie would have undertaken hers in the 1880s. Smith (2014: 42) recorded that by 1899 there were over thirty examination centres in Scotland. The subjects that were offered varied from Mathematics to Greek, Moral Philosophy, German and Chemistry.

In between her diary entries there are several pages full of newspaper clips which Jeanie thought important enough to keep. One was an article in *The Daily Free Press* dated 22nd May 1897 and concerned ‘The Question of Degrees for Women at Cambridge’ (Wilson, 1897: 59). A vote was taken by Cambridge University as to whether it should “admit women students to degrees by diploma upon passing a final honours examination.” At that point women only received the Vice Chancellor’s Certificate and were not permitted to matriculate as full students. The article outlined the aim of the vote which was to recommend that women should be admitted to the titles of Bachelor of Arts and other degrees, “provided that the title so conferred should not involve membership of the University.” There were many hostile residents, some who had taken the time and effort to suspend a sheet over the gateway of Caius College which read: ‘Get you to Girton, Beatrice, get you to Newnham. Here’s no place for you maids’ (Wilson, 1897: 59). Girton College had been established in 1869 as a college for women at the University of Cambridge but was not granted full college status until 1948 which witnessed the official admittance of women.

Ultimately, the motion was defeated 1713 to 662 and as such the result was received with loud cheers amongst the students.

Writing thirty-five years after Jeanie's death, Katherine Trail (1932) recalls that "the necessity for a better education for women was brewing when I was a girl; the LLA, which could be won by examination only, without residence." Trail describes that with the success of the 'University local examinations' established in Edinburgh, Aberdeen followed suit and initiated its own local examinations which were held once a year. The popularity of these examinations was so great that it led "to the demand for something further" and classes were held in the Music Hall Buildings and were arranged by a committee of both men and women. Only latterly were these classes affiliated with the University of Aberdeen. According to Smith (2014: 42) the LLA existed until 1930s and by that point some 5,000 women had completed the qualification.

The small steps taken to ensure a fairer education and recognition of women's academic aspirations is evident in Jeanie's diary. On 24th January 1897 she recalls that the day before the University Students Representative Conference took place at Marischal College. She writes how a representative from St. Andrews was "very much concerned because women students elected as Representatives are not duly heckled here" (Wilson 1897: 25) Evidently, it was accepted albeit slowly, that women were striving to broaden their horizons into the world of academia.

Life as an Unmarried Woman

"One of the more common assumptions about never-married women... is that these women led empty lives because they did not marry and produce families of their own" (Froide,2005:44).

The above assumption about unmarried women carries little weight behind it as can be seen in the life of Jeanie Wilson; an educated woman, a teacher and a keen traveler. Although she never married, she found joy in her life, mainly through the support and closeness of her family. As the eldest child of nine Jeanie lived at home all her life with her mother and father. The Wilson sisters even had an "at home day" where they would stay inside and keep each other company. Even after her sisters Annie and Winnie married, they returned home to visit their sister and mother. Jeanie enjoyed playing dominoes and frequently played whist with her friends whom she refers to as 'the

quartette.’ Some of her other hobbies included sketching and picture-taking perhaps learned from her father in his occupation as an artist and a photographer. Jeanie’s brother Charles Albert Wilson (1952) recalled in a letter ‘that everything he knew about photography, he learned from his father’ so it stands to reason that perhaps Jeanie was also taught the tricks of the trade. For instance, in 1872, aged 22, she and her sister Annie accompanied their father and close family friend George Walker on a trip to Orkney. In his journals Walker (1855: 356) observes how Jeanie was “clever, and so... different from most girls” her age. From her diary entries she was close with her family, namely her sisters Laura, Annie and Winnie; her brother John Hay Wilson and his wife Rosanna also regularly visited the family home. Along with her hobbies she was an avid church-goer and attended regular services at Rubislaw Parish Church. She was also a keen Geologist having had correspondence with the Photographic Section of the Geographical and Geological Section of the British Association. Jeanie laments in September 1897 that her visit to Banff is too late in the year to take photographs to add to ‘the Geological series’.

One can assume that she kept the clips as a way of keeping track of what was going on around her; not only do they contain information pertaining to Aberdeen but also of the world. For instance, there are articles concerning the health of the Tsar of Russia, the Sun Yat Sen case, a fire that swept through Philadelphia and the invention of Marconi’s wireless radio. All of these were seemingly important to her and would have kept her up to date with the latest news although she would have received the papers a few days late.

A Solo Adventure

On 10th April 1897 Jeanie embarked on a month-long solo trip to Germany which she dubbed her ‘German Journey.’ She set off from Aberdeen to Edinburgh and then onto Leith, remarking that she “had never been on this route before as it was all new to me” There is a sense of trepidation there and excitement as she had been planning the trip for a few months prior.

Arriving in Rotterdam on 12th April she spent just over two weeks there before making her way to Löhnerstraße and then on to: “Mainz, Mannheim, Heidelberg and Frankfurt.” She was able to put her German language skills into practice as she journeyed through countryside and cities. Jeanie

would have stayed in boarding houses at each city that she visited. Unfortunately, there is not much else on her ‘German Journey’ in the diary as she writes that she kept a separate diary specifically for the trip which remains lost.

The last entry in the diary is 3rd November 1897 followed by several more pages of newspaper clippings. Mary Jean Wilson died at the age of 80 on 20th April 1930. She is buried with her father and mother, her brother George and her sister Laura at Nellfield Cemetery in Aberdeen.

Conclusion

The diary, once a deep royal red, has now faded: its spine crumbling, and its pages worn with age. Yet, the wealth of information that can be drawn from it should not be underestimated. Not only does it allow us to see what it was like then, it makes us appreciate even more how far we have come now. In less than 130 years since the last entry in her diary, the fight for women’s rights, including education, has gained and has continues to gain monumental strength. Jeanie has been given a voice again; a voice which is no longer bound within the pages of an old notebook and her story can be told. As a woman of the LLA program and from her diary entries she championed equal education. The Universities Act in Scotland (1889) saw women admitted on the same level as men. Yet, in the diary we find newspaper clips which would suggest that there was still more to overcome in terms of gender discrimination and a tolerance for women in education. Overall, the fight for gender equality in all aspects of society is being fought and every day is met with new prejudices. The experiences of both Jeanie Wilson and Katherine Trail shed light on what it was like to be a woman in their respective lifetimes and the barriers that they were confronted with because of their gender.

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