

## THE 'HIDDEN HISTORIES' OF WOMEN AT TRINITY

It has been forty years since female undergraduates were admitted for entry to Trinity College in 1978–9, and only a couple more since women entered the College as postgraduate students (1976) and then Fellows (1977). Such information could lead one to believe that the impact of women upon Trinity has been fairly circumscribed, and the history of women at Trinity relatively brief. This, however, is not the case. As you walk around the College, which in some respects owes its very existence to a woman, the tales of female influence are tucked away in many a corner. Marian Hobson, the first female Fellow to be appointed to the College, whose portrait can now be seen hanging in Trinity's Hall, said, 'there *are* women in the history of this College, it is just that they haven't been all that visible. You have to go looking'. And when you do look, it becomes clear that Trinity is a place which has been shaped not only by the men who have been a fundamental part of the College since its very foundation, but also by women who, despite their comparatively restricted agency, have in various ways made an impact on almost every part of Trinity's great corpus.



Marian Hobson



Katherine Parr

Trinity is renowned for its connection to Henry VIII, the man who merged the existing colleges of Michaelhouse and King's Hall to form the College of the Holy and Undivided Trinity. However, as G. M. Trevelyan writes in his well-known history of the College, *Trinity College: An Historical Sketch*, it was Katherine Parr who 'persuaded her formidable husband to spare the Colleges', which, as places in which the clergy were educated, could be used to promote the royal religion. Katherine Parr, the sixth wife of this ebullient king, 'deserves a statue in Cambridge, and most of all in Trinity'.<sup>1</sup> Though not commemorated in statue form, Katherine's portrait hangs in Trinity's hall. Painted by Ulyana Gumeniuk in 2013 shortly after her fellowship in Creative Arts (2009-2011), the portrait is a study of 'Master John's' original. The sitter in the original portrait, once thought to be Lady Jane Grey, is identifiable as Parr through features such as the crown-shaped brooch on her

<sup>1</sup> Trevelyan (1943), p. 18.

chest, which was found in an inventory of jewels belonging to the queen. Though Katherine's presence in Hall perhaps makes her the most widely recognised royal woman to have influenced the College's history, Henry VIII's daughters, Mary I and Elizabeth I, both have roles to play in the building of the College. Mary I, and Elizabeth after her, both encouraged the building of Trinity's chapel, issuing royal commissions in the years 1554 and 1560 respectively. Mary's commission from 24 October 1554, called for local Justices of the Peace, mayors, sheriffs, bailiffs, constables and other officers to 'take up and provide' various building materials, as well as 'all manner of carpenters, freemasons, carvers...'<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth's noticeably similar commission several years later indicates a continued commitment to the completion of the Chapel, in spite of her different religious beliefs to Mary, and Trinity Chapel was eventually finished in 1567.

The impact made by women upon the College does not stop with royalty, nor does it stop at the construction of Trinity itself. The College gardens, which extend for 36 acres, also hold many 'hidden histories' of women, brought to light in the accounts of the visitors and events which have taken place over the course of the College's existence. F. W. H. Myers, Trinity Fellow from 1865 to 1874 and one of the principal founders of the Society for Psychical Research, recalls walking through the Fellows' Garden with the celebrated novelist known as George Eliot, the pen name of Mary Anne (or Marian) Evans. Some have identified her unconventional



*George Eliot*

relationship with G. H. Lewes – to whom she was not legally married – as one possible reason as to why she decided to publish pseudonymously. By the time of Myers's Fellowship, her identity had been revealed and, in due course, 'society adjusted to the shock of finding that one of its greatest writers was an unbeliever and a woman in a compromising social position'.<sup>3</sup> Myers, whose psychical research into the existence of a soul has received revived interest in the 21st century, seems somewhat enthralled by Eliot's talk of 'God, Immortality and Duty' – of 'how inconceivable was the first, how unbelievable the second, and yet how peremptory and absolute the third.' Myers and Eliot walked through the gardens, eventually standing 'beneath the last twilight of starless skies' and it seemed, Myers wrote, that he was 'gazing,

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<sup>2</sup> Neild, 'Riches and Responsibility', p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.oxforddnb.com/> [Accessed 29th September 2018].

like Titus at Jerusalem, on vacant seats and empty halls on a sanctuary with no Presence to hallow it, and heaven left lonely of a God.<sup>4</sup>

In the same period, women were having a more tangible, practical impact on college life. Trinity has been involved in Camberwell, a district of southeast London, since 1885, when a mission was set up by the College in the Parish of St. George's. The Mission was supported by students, alumni and Fellows alike, with a successful appeal raising £13,000 for a new building in New Church Road which opened in 1895. The Mission thrived, helping to establish day schools, a hospital for the poor, Sunday schools, women's guilds, clubs for working men, choirs, various activities for children, and soup kitchens, amongst other initiatives. Beginning in 1902, and held every January, there were annual gatherings of former and current Trinity men with the men of the parish. Yet when looking at photos of the students heading to Camberwell to support the Mission, the male-only intake of the College does not paint a full picture of Trinity's involvement, and indeed female involvement, in the Camberwell project. For instance, alongside the annual gatherings between volunteers and the men of the parish, there were also visits from the Cambridge Ladies' Committee, established to aid the work of the Mission in 1890 by Agnata Ramsay, wife of Henry Montagu Butler, the Master of Trinity. The involvement of Master's wives in Camberwell was something that was continuing almost a century later; on 5 March 1983 the Trinity College Centre was officially opened by Lady Butler of Saffron Walden.

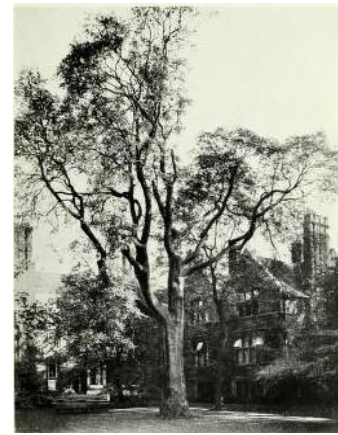
The links between Ladies of the Lodge and the Camberwell Mission were forged not only through visits to and projects in Camberwell itself, but also through visits of Camberwell residents to the College. Rose Elizabeth Paget, married to J.J. Thomson, Montagu Butler's successor as Master, records several occasions upon which the Lodge entertained visitors from Camberwell, such as on 18 July 1922, when around forty-four of the 'Trinity Mission outing from Camberwell lunched at the Lodge as guests of the Ladies Committee'. Paget notes the names of the ladies who served the visitors from Camberwell at lunch and tea, including a 'Mrs and Miss Conybeare'.<sup>5</sup> In J. Butler's memoir of his father, Montagu Butler, there is an account from a Mrs Edward Conybeare about another of these visits. She describes them as follows: 'Every summer the women from the Trinity College Mission in Camberwell used to

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.trin.cam.ac.uk/about/historical-overview/trinity-in-literature> [Accessed 7th August 2018].

<sup>5</sup> Trinity College Library, J J Thomson archive.

spend a day in Cambridge accompanied by the Warden of the Mission and other workers... They were very happy days for all concerned'. One such occasion, she recalls, took place on 25 June 1912. 'It was a very pretty scene... and many ladies, including Mrs. Butler, took pleasure in waiting on the guests'. After dining, the guests were shown the portrait of Bishop Hinchcliffe, once Master of Trinity College, afterwards Bishop of Peterborough. 'His wife about the year 1760 set in the centre of the Master's garden an Ailanthus seed given her by a pious Jesuit missionary priest who had brought it from China. In the middle of the garden it grew till it became the beautiful Ailanthus tree still the ornament of the spot.'<sup>6</sup>



*The Ailanthus Tree*

'Camberwell,' writes Lawrence Goldman, 'has given to Trinity quite as much as the College has given to Camberwell, and it is this neglected feature of the relationship that needs to be stressed.'<sup>7</sup> Montagu Butler recognized this important aspect of Trinity's relationship, believing that those who were engaged in this work also benefitted. As two undergraduates, H. G. M. Clarke and James Duff articulated in their 'First Impressions of the Mission' to the Annual Report of 1919, 'The Trinity Mission is a real part of Trinity College, and it shows a finer side of Trinity than can be seen at Cambridge, for all the beauty of Great Court, and for all the ugliness of the Albany Road buildings...'<sup>8</sup> The link between Trinity and Camberwell is a significant one in the history of the College as a whole, and holds equal importance in regard to women, from the Master's wives who involved themselves in the Mission to the guests who came to visit the College.

Trinity's Master's Lodge has been home to many great men throughout the history of the College. It has also been home to many great women, from wives and daughters to staff and guests. In the case of the unmarried John Smith, Master from 1742 to 1768, it was his sister, Elzimar, who acted as his consort in the Lodge; predeceasing him by ten years, she was honoured by burial in the ante-chapel, the only woman to receive this distinction (though unfortunately her name is misspelt 'Elizmar'). The role of 'Master's wife' is one which has changed significantly over time; a change which has been symbiotic. The position has adapted to fit the personalities and ambitions of the women who have filled it, yet has also carried

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<sup>6</sup> Butler (1925), pp. 170-1.

<sup>7</sup> Goldman (1985), p. 47.

<sup>8</sup> 'Trinity in Camberwell', *Annual Report of 1919*, p. 47.



*Hester Adrian*

evolving meaning and expectations. One such woman was Hester Adrian, a mental health worker and social reformer who was made a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire (DBE) in 1965. A subsequent piece on Lady Adrian, in the 1965 Easter Term Trinity Review, brings to attention some of her many accomplishments, as well as giving insight into her passion for philanthropy.<sup>9</sup> Mentioning her decision to become a psychiatric social worker, 'something that virtually did not exist in 1922', rather than train in law, the article talks of Hester Adrian's career of public service – a career that becomes immediately clear upon reading any page of her brimming diary. The diaries contain tightly packed rows of engagements, leaving barely a square unfilled, and entries often spilling over into the following day's allotted space. From meetings with Social Services, Residential Services, the Women's Club Committee, Education Welfare boards, the Fulbourn Finance officers, the Criminal Science Department, the Royal Society Committee, the Legal Aid Committee and the Matrimonial court, to lunches and dinners with the Mentally Infirm Aged Committee suppers, the Trinity College Mission and the College's undergraduates, Hester Adrian's diaries are a testament to her dedication and selflessness.<sup>10</sup> The Trinity Review article paints a similar picture. In 1933, with the passing of the Children's Act, there was a drive to enlist young women as magistrates, and Lady Adrian was asked to become a J. P. She then began to sit on the children's court. 'The administration of justice,' the author writes, 'particularly in reference to children, has provided the second strand in her public career' – the first strand being her work regarding mental welfare.

Whilst mountaineering in the Peak District in 1942, Lady Adrian and her husband were both involved in an accident – the injuries of which led to the amputation of one of Lady Adrian's legs. Reading the many letters expressing their condolences and wishing a speedy recovery, such as one written in child's handwriting from 'Your little friend, Margaret Moseley', as well as the letters written by Lady Adrian herself at this time, her upbeat attitude and commitment to helping others is once again demonstrated. One letter from the Cambridgeshire Voluntary Association for Mental Welfare even asked Lady Adrian to consider a position as the society's President once she was well enough, as 'We are all of one mind in thinking that no one could so fulfil our hopes and high wishes for our new President than yourself'. The Bedfordshire

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<sup>9</sup> *Trinity Review* (1965 Easter Term), pp. 27-9.

<sup>10</sup> Trinity College Library, Papers of Lord Adrian, Box 37.



Discharged Prisoners' Aid Society recalled Lady Adrian's enthusiasm and activities as a member of their committee, writing 'We trust that whatever the outcome of this accident these activities will not be too much curtailed.' This is echoed in a letter to Hester from a friend, who refused to offer her condolences to Lady Adrian, 'because I am quite sure your gallant spirit is not going to allow it to – or stop you from doing any of the things which you want to do'.<sup>11</sup> They were not wrong. By December of 1942 Lady Adrian was back in the billeting office of the Guildhall, and, as the Trinity Review article notes, 'those who have since seen Lady Adrian bicycling about the town probably have no idea of this disability, so gaily and courageously surmounted.' Hester Adrian was a woman who made a difference to the lives of many people, and even impacted subsequent Master's wives, such as Mollie Butler. In her memoir 'August and Rab', Mollie wrote of an occasion when she and her husband were invited to dine in the Master's Lodge - 'The Adrians, who were worshipped by the college, were both of the high-thinking low-living persuasion, he as a world-famous physiologist, revered almost to the extent of Isaac Newton, and she as a great philanthropist who had devoted a large part of her life to Cambridge Mental Welfare.'<sup>12</sup> The author of the Trinity Review article offers an appropriate closing statement on Lady Adrian, stating that 'few women of our time have given so unstintingly of themselves to public services as Hester Agnes Pinsent Adrian, D. B. E.'<sup>13</sup>



*Agnata Ramsay*

Before Hester Adrian came to the Lodge, however, there was another woman whose life and work was inextricably intertwined with both the college and the university: Agnata Ramsay. Ramsay was a classicist and the wife of Henry Montagu Butler (Master of Trinity from 1886 until 1918). Agnata was a student at Girton College when she was first invited to the Master's Lodge in October 1887, to see a performance of Sophocles' 'Oedipus Rex'. She had just been placed in the First Class of the First Division for Part I of the Classical Tripos, a position which she alone occupied that year.

In a letter to Agnata's father, James, her mother Charlotte brimmed with praise – 'Is it not splendid! Agnata is head of the of the first class and has the first division entirely to herself... telegrams of congratulations have been flowing in.'<sup>14</sup> Agnata's

<sup>11</sup> Trinity College Library, Collection of Professor S. Keynes.

<sup>12</sup> Butler (1987), p. 94.

<sup>13</sup> *Trinity Review* (1965 Easter Term), p. 29.

<sup>14</sup> Trinity College Library, JRMB M4/1.

extraordinary ability in the Classics was clear to her fellow Girtonians, one of whom wrote in the *Girton Review* that they 'eyed [her] with respectful admiration and interest', as well as to Trinity's incumbent Master, whose interest in her recent success 'was to be expected from one who cared much both for the Classics and the education of women'.<sup>15</sup>

Concern with the availability and quality of women's education was an important issue for both Agnata and her husband, and in 1912 Agnata delivered a compelling speech at the Perse School, in Cambridge. Over her life-time she had seen seminal and fundamental changes in women's education, and indeed wider societal attitudes towards women. She recognised the broadening opportunities for women in the workplace, and women's increasing ability to use 'their own distinct qualities' for the good of humanity. In her speech, she urged her listeners not to forget the debt they owed to the women who took the first steps on the path to educational equality of the sexes, and not to waste the new opportunities they had been given. 'Here in school', she said, 'you begin to think more widely, you enter a larger world, you begin to learn something.' 'How,' she then asked her audience, 'do these things move you? What thoughts and aspirations do they kindle in you? If you are to pay back the debt you owe to those who helped to win you freedom and the enlarged sphere of action that lies before you, you must aspire to earn an even better heritage for your successors, to do something for the world you live in. There are many wrongs still to be righted, many ignorant and suffering people to be confronted and helped. Here you can begin to give yourselves for future tasks – here and in your homes.'<sup>16</sup> The resonance of Agnata's words remain, more than one hundred years later. Today, women have a recognised place as a part of Trinity's student and staff body. Whilst, as Agnata felt in 1912, there is still work to be done in regard to educational equality in contemporary society, it is important not to forget the debt we owe to those who first fought for progress in women's education, within Trinity and the University at large.

Women's education is a theme that surfaces frequently when looking at both women and men linked to the College, such as in the writings of Augusta Webster. Webster was a nineteenth-century essayist and poet, and was married to Thomas Webster, a Trinity Fellow. She was not only a prolific writer but also an activist, becoming very involved in the London Suffrage Society in the 1860s. She is the only listed person from Cambridgeshire to have signed John Stuart Mill's first mass women's suffrage petition, presented to the House of Commons on 7

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<sup>15</sup> 'Agnata Ramsay as a Student' reprinted from the *Girton Review*, Lent Term 1932 by A. M. Adam.

<sup>16</sup> Trinity College Library, JRMB M4/8.



Augusta Webster

June 1866. Webster continued to show support for the enfranchisement of women, and general women's issues, in the 1870s. It was during this decade that she voiced her views on several issues regarding women and individualism, in a series of essays later published as *A Housewife's Opinions*, containing sections on 'University Degrees for Women' and 'University Examinations for Women'. In these writings of Webster's, Angela Leighton (Senior Research Fellow at Trinity since 2006) identifies the voice not of an 'out-and-out radical', but rather someone whose scepticism is 'amusingly implicit'. Webster discusses the situation regarding the education of women in Cambridge at some length, comparing it to the differing events unfolding at Universities in London. She pithily highlights the inadequacies of the system of 'degree titles' for women, writing that 'the private recognition by the examiners that Miss So-and-So has the attainments which could have earned her a degree does not confer on her the convenient University mint-mark.' Women who received these titular degrees would be recognised for their achievements only within the University, whilst their male counterparts were free to go out into the world 'stamped and warranted'. The young woman had to satisfy herself with this reality, accepting, Webster believed, that she 'is to the exoteric public no more than she was before...'.<sup>17</sup>

Discussion about the nature of the qualifications women could receive from the University is further linked to Trinity by the College's proportionately frequent mention in the University's voting records on 'The Proposed Admission of Women to Degrees in the University of Cambridge', in 1896.<sup>18</sup> The Proposal opened with a statement in favour of granting full membership of the University to women, noting that 'for more than twenty years women have been residing in Colleges of their own within the University precincts [i.e. Girton and Newnham], and no occasion has arisen for anxiety on the part of the University authorities'. On 7 Feb 1896, 2088 members of the Senate signed a statement urging that a syndicate be appointed to consider the question and terms of admitting women to degrees at Cambridge. Out of the 2088 signatures, 623 of them (29.84 per cent) cite Trinity College next to their names. This is followed by a letter from V. H. Stanton of Trinity College, dated 3 March. Though talking of the trajectory of women's education as 'a branch which would derive life

<sup>17</sup> Webster, *A Housewife's Opinions*, p. 91: <https://archive.org/details/McGillLibrary> [Accessed 25th August 2018].

<sup>18</sup> Pamphlet Collection, 'Degrees for Women' (1896), Trinity College Library.



from the tree, but which would at the same time have in certain respects a separate existence', he writes that 'Women who obtain Honours must be admitted to the B.A. degree. There is a certain injustice in refusing this to them, when many have already shewn that they are capable of holding their own in competition with the ablest men'. The collection of letters, proposals and petitions track the evolving debate. By mid-June, a proposal was circulated containing two propositions. One 'earnestly deprecated' the admission of women to membership of the University and the Degrees conferred upon its members. The second reaffirmed a commitment to the system of conferring titular degrees upon women. This is the final document in the collection. However, whilst the 1896 attempt was unsuccessful, it was crucially not a foregone conclusion.

One of the names that appears on the list of committee members for the collection of documents from 1896 is that of E. A. McArthur. As an undergraduate, Ellen McArthur had achieved the equivalent of a first-class honours in the History Tripos at Girton, and subsequently began teaching at the College. Women were still being barred from membership of the University at this time. However, as Amy Erikson notes in her short biographical piece on McArthur, Trinity College Dublin admitted women to full membership in 1904 and simultaneously offered degrees to women from Oxford and Cambridge. Due to her published work,



*Lady Thomson*

McArthur thus became the first recipient of the D.Litt. She was a keen campaigner and advocate for women's education and enfranchisement.<sup>19</sup> A letter she wrote to Rose Elizabeth Paget is housed in the Wren Library, amidst the collection of Paget's husband, J. J. Thomson. The letter is an appeal to Lady Thomson, of whom McArthur 'heard it said during the election time that you were in sympathy with the suffrage work', to encourage her husband to sign the enclosed petition from the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS). In search of impressive names to head up their list, McArthur tells Lady Thomson that there is no need for her to reply – she is in search only of signatures.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.hist.cam.ac.uk/research/research-funding/ellen-mcarthur> [Accessed 14th August 2019].

<sup>20</sup> Trinity College Library, J J Thomson Archive.

Another woman who made a great impact on the College during her time in the Master's Lodge was Mollie Butler. Mollie was different to Hester Adrian, Marni Hodgkin and Richenda Huxley (the women who preceded and succeeded her in the role) insofar as she was a member of the illustrious Courtauld family and married to prominent politician R. A. ('Rab') Butler. The Butlers' transition to Trinity was not the easiest of times, with Rab showing hesitancy about the move, after being passed over for leadership amidst the Conservative party's crisis of 1963. When he commented



*Mollie Butler*

that, in comparison to London, Trinity would be 'a very small pond indeed', Mollie replied to her husband, 'Yes, but to that pond will come all sorts of distinguished birds and fishes.' 'For me,' she would go on to write, 'Trinity was not an unfamiliar scene' – indeed, her life had been linked in various ways to the College before she became the Lady of the Lodge. Her first husband, August Courtauld, had been a student at Trinity, and had taken Mollie to tea with his Master, Sir J. J. Thomson and the 'terrifying' Lady Thomson, in the very Lodge which was to become Mollie's home, many years later. Mollie recalls her son, Christopher, who had also attended the College as an undergraduate, taking her for tea in his rooms (he had occupied a set on the corner of Great Court known as Mutton-Hole Corner, where tradition says Byron also had rooms). 'And had I not in my youth attended six successive May Weeks and six Trinity May Week Balls?', she muses. 'But,' she continues, 'of course, to be the Master's wife was something else.'<sup>21</sup>

Simon Keynes, Trinity Fellow and grandson of Hester and Edgar Adrian, reflects that Mollie Butler 'must have been among the grandest, with all her pictures in the small drawing room', referencing the Renoir, much admired by visitors to the Lodge, now in the Fitzwilliam Museum. Indeed, one mark which Mollie left upon the Lodge itself was overseeing its redecoration, commenting that her predecessor Lady Adrian's interests were not centred on the domestic scene, 'since it was in need of cleaning, clearing out and cheering up.' Mollie herself, Keynes indicates, was loved by all for her grace and charm, as well as for her pictures, and over the course of thirteen years, many undergraduates entered the Lodge, acquiring 'a lasting idea of gracious living from the atmosphere she created there'. In her book 'August and Rab', Mollie recalls the times they spent entertaining students in the Lodge. The thirteen years for which

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<sup>21</sup> Butler (1987), p. 97.

Rab was Master were the last of Trinity's era with an 'all-male' undergraduate body; the first female undergraduates arrived in October 1978, just four months after the Butlers had departed. However, for the undergraduate parties, Mollie always invited each man to bring a guest and naturally most of the guests were women. One such occasion emphasises the extent to which she prioritised relationships with the College's students. Lady Butler recalls noticing a couple of first-year undergraduates sitting alone on the floor, and after approaching them to ask if they were alright, received an abrupt response – 'No, this is a rotten party.' Mollie then promised to bring the Master to their rooms for a return visit, to show them 'how a party should be properly conducted'. True to her word, a few days later she and Rab climbed the steep stairs to a room at the top of New Court, where they were entertained with beer and buns.<sup>22</sup> Mollie Butler made an impression on those she met, and most certainly on the Trinity students who came into contact with her. In an article in the Trinity Review, written by members of the first cohort of women to enter into the College, they wrote about struggling with 'the reclassification of Lady Molly Butler's Jack Russell dog as a 'cat' in order to comply with College rules".<sup>23</sup>

Master's wives were not the only women who made their mark on Trinity from the Lodge. Montagu Butler, who had been master some forty years previously, paid tribute to his housekeeper Emma Wale as his 'oldest and greatest friend', describing her as 'a very remarkable woman' of great dignity, ability and resource. From her room, which looked out on Great Court between the porch of the Master's Lodge and the College Hall, 'she sat and dispensed happiness to one generation of children after another...' The affection felt for Miss Wale by the Master



*College Servants in Great Court*

and his family is made clear through the many expressions of praise for her in Butler's biography. One such example is a quote from the Master himself on Miss Wale's birthday in July 1905, in which he proclaims that his housekeeper and friend 'looks flourishing on her birthday... What a Queen Emma I she would have made either at Windsor or Otaheite [Tahiti]!' Only five years later, Emma Wale passed away. 'The loss of our beloved Nana – Wawa to the young grandchildren and the parrot – is keenly felt by us all,' Butler wrote. 'She is among the

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<sup>22</sup> Butler (1987), p. 98.

<sup>23</sup> Trinity Review (2018).

very best and most noble-hearted women that I have ever known.<sup>24</sup> Close friendships between the Master's family and those who have worked in the College have been a continued and unexpected occurrence, such as the later relationship between Rab and Mollie Butler's family and their 'inenarrable' housemaid, Mary, whom Mollie described as 'aristocratic looking, with an aquiline nose and perfectly permed hair and wearing a spotless white overall'. During her time at Trinity, Mary was a favourite of all who knew her, especially the college porters, 'to whose lodge she would slip in her spare time for a drink and, no doubt, a gossip'. Lady Butler candidly recalls tales of the College's 'roof climbers', who would attempt to complete the circuit of Great Court at night. The students, after dropping down from hall on to the Master's Lodge, had no option but to squeeze along a narrow passage that took them past the windows to Mary's room. Once awakened by the noise of clambering footsteps, Mollie writes that Mary would hiss 'You'll kill yourselves! I'll tell porters about you, I will' at the misbehaving students. By daylight, however, Mary was a friend to all the undergraduates, welcoming them to the Sunday parties which the Butlers frequently held in the Lodge.<sup>25</sup> Both accounts make clear the impact these women had – not only on the families in their immediate care, but upon the students and other members of staff of the College.

The role of 'bed-maker' at Trinity is one which cannot be stressed enough for its importance when discussing the history of women at Trinity. As Rita McWilliams Tulberg wrote in her work on women at Cambridge, it must be remembered that for a considerable time, 'only Professors and Heads of Colleges were free to marry. The colleges were monastic communities and until 1882 when the rule was changed, a man had to resign his fellowship on marriage. A man might easily spend his undergraduate years speaking to no other woman than his bed-maker.'<sup>26</sup> Whilst the position of 'bed-maker' still exists in the College, it has changed significantly over the years. The role used to be split into two – that of 'bed-maker' and that of 'help'. When looking through records of employment from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it can be seen that helps were often promoted to the 'bed-maker' position due to diligent and efficient work, sometimes with several generations of the same family working on the same staircase, such as John Wright, Sarah Wright and Elizabeth Wright, who all feature in the College's book of payments from 1749. During the Mastership of Montagu Butler, it was one of the Master's official duties to appoint to the dignity of bed-making. In 1890, he added at the end of a letter to his wife, 'Since I wrote the above I have formally

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<sup>24</sup> Butler (1925), pp. 156-7.

<sup>25</sup> Butler (1987), p. 105.

<sup>26</sup> McWilliams Tullberg (1998), p. 30.

appointed four "Helps" to be henceforward "Bedmakers"... They had "got their blue", or in Hughie's graceful words of a boy who gets into the Harrow Eleven, they had "got their flannels." Human nature is much the same all the world over. This part of my work, the appointment and dismissal of poor Helps and Bedmakers, is one in which you can help me. You shall dismiss and I appoint. You shall do the Judgment and I the Mercy...'.<sup>27</sup>

It would indeed appear that the helps and bed-makers worked under a watchful eye. A book recording the employment of 'bed-makers' within the same period in which Montagu Butler was Master of the College offers information on helps and bed-makers, such as a Mrs. Horslett, born in 1848. Mrs. Horslett was commended by the committee in 1886, but then informed in 1888 that she should not expect promotion unless she could learn to read. Either the committee changed their mind, or Mrs. Horslett did learn to read, for she went on to a bed-maker's position in Whewell's Court in March 1892. However, by March 1899 Mrs. Horslett's work was reported as being 'far from satisfactory' and she was dismissed from her post in January 1902. Several pages later, details of a Miss A. Johnson, born in 1868, tell of her resignation in 1906 'on pressure' due to her ill health. An additional note, written in 1910, reports that she was taken to Fulbourn Asylum.<sup>28</sup>

As to be expected with people who see each other on a near-daily basis, many students and resident Fellows form close friendships with their bed-makers. Influential twentieth-century economist Piero Sraffa was one such person, whose personal letters, in the Wren Library, contain notes left for him by his bed-maker. Sraffa joined the University as a lecturer after migrating to England from Italy. After resigning his post as a lecturer in 1930 he was appointed Marshall librarian, and shortly afterwards became the assistant director of research to



*Servant and Student in New Court*

act as mentor to research students. In 1939, he was elected to a fellowship at Trinity, and thus began his seemingly 'love-hate' relationship with his bed-maker. A note left for Sraffa at Christmas reads: 'Close your outside doors, I am off – "A Merry Christmas" and don't eat too much. Shall see to everything, M.S.' A following note thanks Piero for his gift. However, on another piece of torn paper, the tone changes to one of mild irritation, protesting that 'Mr.

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<sup>27</sup> Butler (1925), p. 155.

<sup>28</sup> Trinity College Library, *Servants' Ledger*, 1889-1917.

Sraffa, I think you are just being awkward in not allowing me in to make your bed, once you are up. Very sorry am unable to wait any longer today M.S'.<sup>29</sup> Looking at Sraffa's staircase, 'L, Neville's Court', in the previously mentioned account books, the patterns of relatives working together can be seen once more, with a Mrs. Shadbolt Senior and a Mrs. Shadbolt Junior both being recorded as working in the staircase in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries.

Located just above Sraffa's old staircase is the Wren Library, famous for its stunning architecture and the vast array of valuable manuscripts and artefacts it houses. The Wren, designed by Christopher Wren in 1676, is now a place of fascination and scholarly study for all sexes. However, it was not always so welcoming to women. Virginia Woolf recalls, in her polemical *A Room of One's Own* (1929), her attempts to enter the library, and the materialisation of 'a deprecating, silvery, kindly gentleman, who regretted in a low voice as he waved me back that ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a Fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of introduction'.<sup>30</sup> Yet the libraries of Trinity



Virginia Woolf

have been impacted by women for hundreds of years, from the architecture of the Wren itself, adorned with the statues of four women, to the valuable content which it contains. The thirteenth-century Trinity Apocalypse, one of the great treasures of the Wren, was donated to the College by Anne Sadlier in 1649. This was the first year of the Interregnum, witnessing the execution of Charles I and the establishment of the Republic. Sadlier's inscription in the fly-leaf of the Apocalypse offers an insight into the turmoil the country experienced, as conflicting notions about religion and the nature of kingship made themselves increasingly visible. 'When times are better settled', she writes, the Apocalypse should be 'given to Trinitie Colledge Librarie in Cambridge, God in his good time restore her'.<sup>31</sup> Many years later, in 1813, author of adult and children's literature, Maria Edgeworth, came to visit Trinity and recorded her observations. She had first visited the University Library, which she had found 'not nearly as fine as the Dublin College Library'. When she entered the Wren, she was highly impressed: 'Beautiful! ...The proportions of this room are excellent, and everything but the ceiling, which is too plain'.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Trinity College Library, Papers of Piero Sraffa, I126.

<sup>30</sup> Woolf (1929), p. 12-3.

<sup>31</sup> Trinity College Cambridge, MS R.16.2, front flyleaf.

<sup>32</sup> McKitterick (1995), p. 26.





Mary Somerville

Several of the works of the mathematician Mary Somerville can also be found in the Wren Library. This includes a copy of her famous *Mechanism of the Heavens*, which is signed 'From Mary Somerville'. Fellow (and in due course Master) of Trinity, William Whewell wrote in 1831, 'I am glad that our young mathematicians will soon have easy access to the book, which will be very good for them as soon as they can read it. When Mrs. Somerville shows herself in the field which we mathematicians have been labouring in all our lives, and puts us to shame, she ought not to be surprised if we move off to other ground, and betake ourselves to poetry.'<sup>33</sup> Dr Whewell's praise of Somerville's physically intimidating book provoked a significant response from the author. 'I consider,' she later wrote, 'this as the highest honour I ever received, at the time I was no less sensible of it, and was most grateful. I was surprised and pleased beyond measure to find that my book should be so much approved of by Dr. Whewell.'<sup>34</sup> Somerville's memoirs, written in her eighty-ninth year, and later added to by her daughter following Somerville's death in 1872, tell not only of her communication with Trinity Fellow Dr Whewell, but also of her visits to the College, as well as her strong views on the education of women. Expressing her frustration with the fact that she often had to interrupt her work to entertain unexpected visitors (who, of course, could not know that she was working on mathematical problems), she thought it 'unjust that women should have been given such a desire for knowledge if it were wrong to acquire it'.<sup>35</sup> Somerville's remarkable work in mathematics and astronomy led to her nomination, alongside Caroline Herschel, as the first female member of the Royal Astronomical Society. Mary Somerville's attitudes towards the education of women, as well as the enfranchisement of women, become clear when reading her correspondence with the aforementioned politician and philosopher John Stuart Mill. After she wrote to thank Mr. Mill for his provocative book *The Subjection of Women*, the author replied to express his gratitude for her approbation of his work. This was the approval of someone who 'has rendered such inestimable service to the cause of women by affording in her own person so high an example of their intellectual capabilities, and, finally, by giving to the protest in the great Petition of last year the weight and importance of the signature which headed it'.<sup>36</sup> Here, he refers to

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<sup>33</sup> Somerville (1873), p. 170.

<sup>34</sup> Somerville (1873), p. 172.

<sup>35</sup> Somerville (1873), p. 28.

<sup>36</sup> Somerville (1873), p. 344.

the 1866 petition to parliament signed by Augusta Webster, of which Mary Somerville was the lead signatory.

Both Mary and William Somerville were guests warmly welcomed to Trinity. In a letter to Dr Somerville about their imminent visit in 1834, Professor Sedgwick wrote that 'We have no cannons at Trinity College, otherwise we would fire a salute on your entry; we will however give you the warmest greeting we can.'<sup>37</sup> Mary Somerville was a remarkable woman connected to the history of the College not only through her visits, but through the presence and significance of her work. A highly skilled and committed mathematician, working during a period in which her own work sometimes had to be published under the name of her husband, it was not only Dr Whewell who recognised her ability. The eminent Pierre Laplace told her, 'There have been only three women who have understood me. These are yourself, Mrs. Somerville, Caroline Herschel and a Mrs. Greig of whom I know nothing.'<sup>38</sup> With Greig being the name of Somerville's first husband, Mary was first and third of these three women whom Laplace so praised. Mary Somerville was a woman whose mind 'revolted against oppression and tyranny' and 'resented the injustice of the world in denying all those privileges of education to my sex which were so lavishly bestowed upon men'.<sup>39</sup>

In 1882, Robert Potts, M.A., of Trinity College, wrote 'A few brief remarks on the recent legislation for the Colleges and the University of Cambridge'. In this, he discusses a Royal Commission issued in the year 1850, and the subsequent Report of 1852. The concluding remarks to the Report were as follows: 'What above all other things gives us hope for the future good of Cambridge is the *manly*, free and truth-loving character of her studies... In all her members, she believes that she *possesses a body of men*, who, strong in their historical remembrances, cling to what is good, would seek for no needless change, and would admit of no change which had not the promise of scientific, moral and religious benefit.'<sup>41</sup> Much has changed since the time in which this Report was published, and what Cambridge offers is not 'manly' character, but one which aims to foster academic excellence in all of its students, regardless of gender. Today, whilst there exist areas in which progress can still be made, the University of Cambridge and its constituent Colleges are a place in which both men and women can pursue a higher education. As Trinity celebrates the fortieth anniversaries of opening its

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<sup>37</sup> Somerville (1873), p. 180.

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.maths.ed.ac.uk/>[Accessed 5<sup>th</sup> September 2018].

<sup>39</sup> Somerville (1873), p. 45.

<sup>41</sup> Potts (1882), p. 3.

doors to female students and Fellows, there is much well-deserved focus on changes that have occurred since 1976. Now, as Agnata Ramsay so emphatically urged in her 1912 speech, we must not forget the debt we owe to our predecessors. The history of Trinity College is one which has been shaped by women since its very foundation, and once you go looking, the hidden histories of women at Trinity are revealed.

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**Amelia Hutchinson is a second-year undergraduate reading History.**

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