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WOMEN'S EDUCATIONAL ACTIVISM AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN IRELAND, 1850–1912

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Irish higher education in the mid-nineteenth century was designed to accommodate men of the upper and middle classes. The enduring strength of traditionalist Victorian social attitudes, dictating a separate and lesser role for women in society and the explicit relegation of women to the private and domestic setting, remained a formidable barrier to female participation in university education up to the early 1900s.[1] The exclusion of women from university colleges was first challenged by Protestant activists and educators, while the early success of the Protestant women's colleges and creation of the Royal University stimulated a substantial development of similar institutions for Catholic girls. A feminist campaign led by women graduates was crucial in securing the entry of women to the universities on the same basis as men in the early 1900s, not least because the women graduates succeeded in mobilising support on an inter-confessional basis.

Judith Harford's work charts the emergence and academic impact of the women's colleges, as well as their complex and ambivalent role in the debates surrounding women's participation in the early 1900s. Susan Parkes explores the admission of women to Trinity College Dublin and their frequently contested position within TCD over the following century. Greater attention has also been given to Irish women activists through the entries of the *Dictionary of Irish Biography* and its Ulster counterpart. This chapter sets out to explore the crucial role of women's educational activism in opening university education to female participation and to illustrate the diverse cultural, religious and political influences which shaped different forms of women's activism in this period.

The oldest university in Ireland, Trinity College Dublin, founded under an Elizabethan charter in 1592, maintained a monopoly of offices and academic posts for a male Anglican elite until the late 1800s.[2] While all religious tests for posts and offices outside its Divinity School were abolished by Fawcett's Act in 1873,[3]

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the liberalising influence of Fawcett's legislation did not extend to women, who remained excluded from the university for the rest of the century. Successive British governments from the mid-nineteenth century sought to resolve the religious and political grievances of an increasingly assertive Catholic middle class but struggled to meet Catholic demands without alienating the Protestant Ascendancy which had monopolised political and social power since the early 1700s. Sir Robert Peel's government sought to conciliate the Catholic middle class through educational legislation, leading to the establishment in 1849 of the Queen's Colleges in Belfast, Cork and Galway as state-supported, non-denominational institutions which were prohibited from imposing religious tests and excluded theology.[4] But the Queen's Colleges were denounced by the Synod of Thurles in 1850 as 'a system of education fraught with grievous and intrinsic dangers'.[5] Paul Cullen (1803–78), the ultramontane archbishop of Dublin, who sought to enforce papal authority over the Irish Catholic church, mobilised opposition to the 'godless colleges'. Instead, Cullen took the lead in establishing a Catholic University in 1854, initially under the leadership of John Henry Newman, a famous theologian, academic and subsequently Catholic prelate, who was the most notable Anglican convert to Catholicism of his generation. The fledgling university struggled for survival, lacking any statutory endowment or a royal charter to validate its degrees: it attracted a total of only 1177 registered students over a twenty-five-year period between 1854 and 1879.[6] The divergent ideological projects embodied in the Queen's Colleges and the Catholic university shared common ground in offering academic education for a small minority of upper middle-class men and in their exclusion of women. The 'Irish university question' over the following generation revolved around the commitment of the British political elite to non-denominational university education, the resistance of unionists to innovations that threatened the privileged status of Trinity College and the demand for denominational 'equality' in higher education by the Catholic bishops. This campaign for equality was ultimately about achieving an acceptable religious and cultural milieu for endowed university education to safeguard the faith and morals of young Catholic men.[7]

The first institutions for the higher education of women were established in Belfast and Dublin by Protestant activists, often engaged in various campaigns associated with nineteenth-century liberalism. The Ladies' Collegiate School was founded in Wellington Place, Belfast, in 1859 by Margaret Byers, a teacher and former Presbyterian lay missionary in China.[8] The school offered an academic curriculum, including modern history, natural science and classical subjects, which went far beyond the limited instruction traditionally offered to girls.[9] As Harford notes, the Ladies' Collegiate School was 'a radical departure in the education of girls', due to its academic rigour, wide-ranging curriculum and competition in public examinations on a similar footing to men.[10] The school was renamed as Victoria College to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Queen Victoria's accession in 1887 and in its first generation had already established an impressive academic reputation.[11] Following the foundation of the Royal University, Victoria College established a department offering 'the ordinary courses of university study in 1881.'[12]

Women's educational activism owed a great deal to the radical dissenting tradition of Ulster and Scottish Presbyterianism. Isabella Tod, a Scottish Presbyterian educator and political activist, became a leading advocate for the education of women at secondary and higher level.[13] Tod served as secretary of the Belfast Ladies' Institute, established in 1867 as a trail-blazing institution offering 'advanced classes' for middle-class women leading to professional or business expertise.[14] Byers and Tod were liberals who took a leading part in the suffrage and temperance movements (see contributions to this volume by McCormick, Tiernan and Ward), but were most influential in education.[15] They led a delegation to London in 1878 to lobby the Conservative government of Benjamin Disraeli to include girls within new intermediate education legislation.[16] The Intermediate Education (Ireland) Act, 1878 sanctioned state support for denominational intermediate schools through a system of public examinations involving payment by results: schools secured state payments based on the performance of their students in competitive public examinations.[17] Despite the opposition of the Catholic bishops, the delegation succeeded in persuading Lord Cairns, the Belfast-born Lord Chancellor, and James Lowther, the chief secretary, to support their case.[18] Lowther secured the agreement of MPs for an amendment at the committee stage of the Bill on 25 July 1878, 'For applying, as far as conveniently may be, the benefits of this Act to the education of girls.'[19] The explicit inclusion of girls in the legislation was a notable advance for women's participation which offered a precedent for university education.

The movement for women's higher education in Dublin had similar origins in middle class Protestant educational activism. Alexandra College was established in 1866, at the instigation of a Quaker educationalist, Anne Jellicoe.[20] Alexandra was the first institution in Ireland to provide university education for women, offering a wide-ranging curriculum encompassing history, mental and moral philosophy, Latin, natural science and mathematics. The college explicitly focused on offering a rigorous academic education to 'women of the middle and upper classes of this country'.[21] Alexandra, which was influenced by the example of Queen's College, London, was established under the auspices of the Church of Ireland but open to women of all Christian denominations.[22] Jellicoe served as lady superintendent of the college until her death in 1880. Yet strict limitations still applied to the place of women educators even within all female educational settings where their leadership was crucial. While Jellicoe enjoyed crucial support from Richard Chevenix Trench, Church of Ireland archbishop of Dublin, as the de facto leader of the college, she worked with an all-male college council from which she herself was excluded.[23]

Alexandra developed close connections with Trinity College Dublin and several professors and fellows of TCD taught in the school during the late 1800s, including J.H. Bernard, a future provost and Anglican archbishop of Dublin.[24] The college Board agreed in 1869 to introduce examinations leading to a certificate for external women candidates, mainly due to lobbying from Alexandra, but this concession extended only as far as second year and did not allow access to college courses.[25] The authorities of Alexandra advocated for affiliation of the college to the University of Dublin during the late 1800s, but no scheme came close to winning

the support of the Board: Trinity's jealously guarded status as the sole constituent college of the University of Dublin militated against formal affiliation of the kind adopted for women's colleges at Oxford and Cambridge.[26] Although an increasing proportion of junior fellows and non-fellow professors in TCD favoured the admission of women to the university at the time of its tercentenary in 1892, George Salmon, the provost, was firmly opposed and the status quo was upheld by a majority of elderly senior fellows.[27] The option of affiliation was a halfway house which never commanded sufficient support within Trinity.

Disraeli's government achieved a pragmatic reconstruction of university education in Ireland by creating a new examining university in 1879, which would confer degrees based on examination performance, but did not require attendance at university lectures or college courses other than medicine.[28] The newly constituted Royal University from 1882 encompassed the Queen's Colleges; Magee College, Derry which was founded in 1865 under the auspices of the Presbyterian General Assembly to train young men as Presbyterian ministers and University College Dublin (UCD), the main inheritor of the Catholic university. The Royal University offered 'indirect endowment' to denominational colleges through the allocation of fellowships by the university senate.[29] A committee led by Tod lobbied successfully for the inclusion of women within the new university in line with the precedent established by the Intermediate Education Act.[30] The government's scheme was the first meaningful step towards female participation in the formal structures of university education.[31] The Royal University was only the second university in the UK to open its degrees to women, following the example of London University in 1878.[32] Yet women were excluded from lectures offered by the male Fellows of the university, creating a new layer of exclusion which required women to secure their own teaching without the support enjoyed by their male counterparts.[33] Despite its limitations, the new institution marked a watershed in facilitating access to university matriculation and qualifications for women.

If the early Protestant colleges were shaped by activists whose agenda encompassed various liberal causes, the burgeoning power of the Catholic church underpinned the creation of Catholic women's colleges. As Harford points out, no 'organised presence' of higher education for Catholic women materialised before the creation of the Royal University, reflecting the ambivalence, if not outright hostility, of the Catholic church towards initiatives that might challenge traditional gender roles and their preference for single-sex education at intermediate level.[34] When the bishops restructured the failing Catholic University in 1882–3 to encompass several Catholic colleges and entrusted the administration of UCD to the Jesuits, university education for Catholic women did not feature on their agenda. Yet such a traditionalist stance was not maintained for long, mainly due to the fear of proselytising, as Alexandra offered an attractive route to university qualifications for Catholic girls (see Roddy's contribution to this volume).[35]

William Walsh, the dynamic archbishop of Dublin (1885–1921), who was the leading ecclesiastical advocate of equality for Catholics in higher education, proved willing to support a network of Catholic women's colleges offered by female

religious orders. Morrissey argues that the archbishop played a central role as de facto patron in fostering the Catholic colleges.[36] Harford notes, however, that Walsh responded to lobbying by female religious leaders who appealed to his concern about proselytising as a result of Alexandra's appeal to Catholic girls.[37] The prioress of the Dominican convent in Eccles St in Dublin city centre, Mother M. Antonina Hanley, secured Walsh's support to establish the first Catholic women's university department alongside their secondary school in 1885.[38] Similarly, the Ursuline order in Cork began to offer university courses from 1890 at St Angela's College and High School, which enjoyed the support of Alphonsus O'Callaghan, the bishop of Cork.[39]

Walsh co-opted initiatives by female religious orders and was instrumental in the establishment of St Mary's University College in 1893, when the Dominican communities at Eccles St and Sion Hill in the suburb of Blackrock collaborated to establish a college serving as a 'common centre' of Catholic higher education for women.[40] The decision to relaunch the original Dominican initiative as a university college was an unmistakable signal of ecclesiastical support. Walsh offered financial support to St Mary's College and served as president of the college council which approved its programme of studies.[41] Yet the all-male composition of the council underlined that despite the crucial role of the nuns as leaders and teachers, they were obliged to conform to traditional gender roles in which authority ultimately rested with male prelates.[42] A similar initiative by the Loreto nuns to establish a university department at Loreto College, St. Stephen's Green did not attract Walsh's support and it was the leadership of members of the Loreto Institute, notably Mother Michael Corcoran, which led to the successful establishment of the college.[43]

The women's colleges flourished in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, establishing an impressive record of academic achievement. Almost a quarter of the Royal University's 2,173 graduates were women by 1900, ensuring that university education in Ireland was no longer a male preserve.[44] The majority of successful female candidates were drawn from women's colleges: 55 per cent of female candidates who passed examinations in Arts between 1891 and 1900 were prepared by the women's colleges, while less than 10 per cent of successful women candidates attended the Queen's Colleges or Magee College.[45] A substantial majority of Catholic female students opted for denominational women's colleges.[46] The colleges, whether Protestant or Catholic, offered an academic education to women from professional and middle-class backgrounds, facilitating access to university qualifications and opening up access to 'domains of knowledge' which had previously been closed to women.[47] The success of the women's colleges in presenting students for Royal University examinations testified to the ability of women students to compete effectively with their male counterparts.

Yet despite the success of female graduates, the charter of the Royal University was hardly a manifesto for educational equality. The institutions under its auspices had no obligation to admit women to courses, its senate included no women and membership of the convocation was legally confined to male graduates.[48] Moreover, none of the prestigious university fellowships were allocated to women, although

the senate permitted women to hold term limited junior fellowships which were created from 1894 to assist with university examinations.[49] Women were *de facto* excluded due to the original division of the university fellowships on denominational lines to colleges approved by the senate in 1882–4.[50]

The Queen's Colleges admitted women from the 1880s, with Belfast being the first to enrol female students in 1882, followed by Cork in 1885 and Galway in 1888.[51] But while this concession was significant in establishing a precedent for the future, it had little practical impact outside Belfast, not least due to the condemnation of the 'godless Colleges' by the Catholic bishops. Only 10 women out of a strikingly low total of 93 were attending Queen's College, Galway in 1901–2 and female students accounted for only 6 per cent (12) of a student population of 190 in Queen's College, Cork.[52] The proportion of female students was somewhat greater in Belfast, where women accounted for 11.7 per cent (41) of 349 students in 1901–2.[53] Magee College saw a relatively high participation of women, who made up 22 per cent (13) of its students in 1901–2, ironically in a college originally dedicated to the training of young men for the Presbyterian ministry.[54] The colleges of the Catholic University between 1882 and 1909 were mainly segregated by gender, with the exception of the Catholic University medical school in Cecilia St, Dublin, which agreed to admit women students from 1896.[55] William Delany S.J., the long-serving president of UCD (1883–8 and 1897–1909), refused to open UCD to women on an equal basis to men. Delany was firmly opposed to co-education, which was inconsistent with a Victorian sense of social propriety that he shared with many contemporaries.[56] The 'Royal' was an uneasy halfway house, which facilitated the women's colleges but did not offer equal participation in university education.

The Irish Association of Women's Graduates and Candidate Graduates (IAWG) was founded in 1902 to ensure that university education 'shall be open to women equally with men', reflecting the determination of a new generation of women graduates to secure equality of access to higher education. Most of its leaders were graduates of the Royal University who had attended women's colleges.[57] The IAWG was a feminist, inter-confessional movement which spanned the sectarian divisions of early-twentieth-century Ireland. The association's first president, Alice Oldham (1850–1907), was an Anglican educator and activist, who was a lecturer at Alexandra College and the founding secretary of the Central Association of Irish Schoolmistresses.[58] Among the group's leading figures were Catholic graduates of the Royal University, including its founding vice-president, Mary Hayden (1862–1942), who had attended Eccles St. and Alexandra College, and Agnes O'Farrelly (1874–1951), who attended St. Mary's College before becoming a lecturer in Irish at Loreto and Alexandra.[59] Hayden secured a junior fellowship in history and English by examination in 1895, but was unsuccessful in applying four times for senior fellowship – a notable illustration of the open gender inequalities within the Royal University.[60] Hayden was deeply engaged in the Gaelic League and active in the women's suffrage movement.[61] O'Farrelly was one of the most prominent Irish-language activists of her generation: a close ally of Douglas Hyde, she became a leading Irish-language educator.[62]

The feminist movement faced resistance not only from bastions of the Anglo-Irish establishment and representatives of the Catholic lay and clerical elite, but also from the leaders of the women's colleges. A key fissure emerged among women's educational activists on whether women should continue to attend women's colleges, if they were endowed and affiliated to universities or be admitted to university colleges on an equal basis with men.[63] Separate collegiate instruction for women emerged as the main bone of contention between the women's colleges and a new generation of feminists in the IAWG. Feminist activists such as Oldham, Hayden and O'Farrelly clashed with leading figures from the women's colleges in their evidence before successive royal commissions in the early 1900s. Among those who made the case for the separate education of female students in affiliated women's colleges were early pioneers of women's education, including Margaret Byers and Henrietta White, principal of Alexandra.[64]

The appointment of the Royal Commission on University Education in Ireland headed by Lord Robertson in 1901 offered an important opportunity to critics of the existing system. The commission noted that the proportion of women taking the university examinations by 1901–2 'has reached a remarkably high total'.[65] The IAWG made an influential submission arguing for equality of access, including the opening up of lectures, laboratories and professional schools to female students and eligibility for all degrees, privileges and appointments of the university to 'women equally with men'.[66] The opposite case for separate women's colleges was made by White, Byers and James Macken on behalf of Loreto College.[67] The commission's report in 1902 was a victory for the IAWG: referencing their submission extensively, the commissioners accepted all of their demands.[68] But the impact of the commission was inconclusive, not least because the commissioners themselves were divided on the principal recommendations of their report.[69] The debate between the IAWG and the women's colleges was played out once again before the Fry Commission appointed by a newly elected Liberal government in 1906. Henrietta White made a renewed appeal in favour of the affiliation of women's colleges to the university, while Agnes O'Farrelly and Ethel Hanan, on behalf of the IAWG, argued that affiliation compromised the principle of equal participation in higher education by men and women.[70] The report of the Fry Commission in 1907 was ambivalent, supporting female participation but leaving open the possibility that it could be achieved through recognition of the women's colleges by an existing university.[71]

Yet more significant than the inconclusive outcome of the official enquiries was the decision by the Board of Trinity College to allow the admission of women. McDowell and Webb noted that by 1900 Trinity was increasingly isolated, as the only university in Britain and Ireland which offered neither access to college courses nor the ability to take university degrees within an affiliated college.[72] The new 'civic universities' in England made no distinction between male and female students, while the major Scottish universities had liberalised their admission requirements to allow for entry of women in the late 1800s.[73] Moreover, Trinity's Oxbridge counterparts, which carried greater weight with its academic elite, took a

qualified and incremental approach to allow female participation. Cambridge from 1881 and Oxford from 1884 facilitated access for women to teaching and most examinations taken by men, although neither university allowed women to take university degrees.[74] Generational turnover in membership of the Board broke the stalemate as six of the senior fellows were removed by death or retirement between 1897 and 1901, to be replaced by advocates of change, including Anthony Traill and J.P. Mahaffy.[75] Despite Salmon's opposition, the Board agreed by a majority vote in 1902 that women should be admitted to the college and the king's letter to formalise the necessary statutory change was issued in December 1903.[76] The ground-breaking decision was hedged with multiple practical restrictions on female students, including a famous, long-lasting rule requiring women students to leave campus by 6 p.m., strict dress requirements and exclusion from certain areas of the college.[77] Trinity's decision undermined traditionalist rationales for exclusion of women from university colleges, but also underlined that admission of women would be combined with a continued assertion of power by male academic elites.

The momentum towards inclusion of women in university education proved too great to be derailed either by the persistence of Victorian attitudes among male academic elites or the campaign for self-preservation by the women's colleges. Despite the inconclusive outcomes of the royal commissions, their deliberations and articulate exposition of their case by the IAWG contributed to an emerging consensus that women should have equal access to university colleges. The wider upsurge in social reform following the election of the Liberal government in 1906 also created a favourable context for reform in higher education. The Irish Universities Act, 1908, which was drafted by Augustine Birrell, the chief secretary, in collaboration with Walsh, was designed to be acceptable to the Catholic bishops.[78] The legislation provided for the dissolution of the Royal University and creation of two distinct university institutions based in Dublin and Belfast, the federal National University of Ireland (NUI) and Queen's University Belfast (QUB): both were open to women on the same basis as men. The charter of the NUI established that 'Women shall be eligible equally with men to be members of the University or of any authority of the university and to hold any office or enjoy any advantages of the University.'[79] The government appointed women to the first senate of each university and the legislation provided for one of the four members subsequently nominated by the Crown to be female – the first instance of a legal mandate for equality between men and women in Irish higher education.[80] Mary Hayden became the sole female member of the NUI senate, as well as the first woman to serve on the governing body of UCD.[81] Margaret Byers was nominated to the senate of QUB, ironically in the light of her opposition to co-educational universities, along with Mary Ann Hutton, an eminent Irish literature scholar.[82]

While the legislation conceded the principle of female participation, conflict continued over the form that such participation might take, as the Catholic women's colleges embarked on a struggle for recognition of their colleges by the NUI.[83] When the women's colleges applied for recognition to offer 'approved courses of study' sanctioned by the university, their application was rejected in December

1909 by the Chancellor, William Walsh, based on legal advice that such recognition could be given only to students pursuing courses in either constituent or recognised colleges.[84] Loreto College and St. Mary's College then applied to secure the status of recognised colleges under the Irish Universities Act. The IAWG vigorously opposed their applications, warning the senate that it was 'undesirable to recognise any Courses of Lectures for women students for the Arts Degrees of the University other than those delivered in the Lecture Halls of the Colleges named in the Charter…'[85]

The women's colleges enjoyed influential supporters within the senate, including William Delany and Dr John Healy, archbishop of Tuam.[86] But Walsh stayed aloof, advising the college leaders to submit only a single application for recognition and expressing pessimism about their chances for success.[87] The archbishop played a crucial part in negotiating an affiliation clause in the Irish Universities Act to facilitate the inclusion of St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, as a recognised college within the NUI.[88] Walsh did not make any similar effort to accommodate the women's colleges, reflecting the limited importance accorded by most bishops to female higher education. The senate referred the applications to the governing body of UCD, which first rejected affiliation for both colleges, but changed course in 1911 to offer partial recognition to Loreto College for a three-year period.[89] This recommendation drew a sharp rebuke from the IAWG, which reiterated in July 1911 that recognition of non-endowed private institutions would deprive women of the high standard of education in the university colleges.[90] Moreover, the NUI Board of Studies requested the senate to secure a legal opinion on the status of women's colleges as 'they were unable to understand the exact relations between the proposed College and the secondary instruction admittedly given in the same locality…'.[91] This resolved the dispute, as the opinion of legal counsel was unfavourable and the senate decided on 30 October 1912 to inform the superiors of St Mary's and Loreto that it 'was legally advised that the applications for the recognition of these respective Colleges could not be complied with'.[92] The decision confirmed the triumph of the IAWG in securing equal access for women to university colleges.

The university settlement achieved formal equality of rights for women in terms of admission to college courses and the removal of formal discrimination in relation to office holding within the institutions. But the universities to which women were admitted after a protracted struggle remained profoundly unequal. Irish university colleges in the early to mid-twentieth century remained small, elite institutions dominated by professional and upper-middle-class men. TCD admitted 47 female students in 1904 and women made up 15 per cent of the student body by 1914.[93] Only 67 students in UCD were women in 1910–1, just over 10 per cent of the student body.[94] Queen's had the most substantial participation of women among its full-time cohort of any Irish university, with 132 female students making up 21 per cent of the student population in 1909–10, reflecting an earlier acceptance of women students than any of its counterparts.[95]

Pašeta comments that in terms of women's participation in UCD, 'the establishment of the NUI finally guaranteed them the full academic and employment equality

for which they had been campaigning for almost 40 years'.[96] Yet discrimination against women remained firmly entrenched not only in the culture of university institutions, but also in policies and regulations overtly designed to limit the impact of co-education.[97] The universities settlement facilitated some upward mobility by female academics but was a far cry from employment equality. The Dublin commission, which made the first appointments in the NUI, appointed several exceptionally able women to academic posts. Four women were appointed to the teaching staff of UCD, including Mary Hayden as first lecturer and within two years professor in modern Irish history, Mary Macken as professor of German and Maria Degani as professor in Italian and Spanish.[98] Agnes O'Farrelly became a long-serving lecturer in the Irish language and ultimately succeeded Hyde as professor of modern Irish poetry. The commissioners achieved a limited advance in female academic participation within the NUI compared to the monopoly of permanent appointments by men within the Royal University. Yet women accounted for less than 7 per cent of senior appointments in UCD by 1916.[99] A similar pattern prevailed in UCC, where only two of the first 20 professors were women.[100] Trinity was also tentative in appointing female academics and only eight full-time female lecturers were employed in the college by 1939.[101] Moreover, the modest advance in academic appointments within the NUI in 1909–11 proved a landmark in women's participation which was not surpassed (or sometimes even equalled) until the late twentieth century.[102]

The universities settlement was a halfway revolution in terms of female participation. The legislation established formal equality of rights for the entry of women to Irish universities while ensuring co-education at college level, both bitterly contested in the late nineteenth century.[103] Yet established structures of power and privilege remained intact within the reconstituted universities, which militated against equality of opportunity for women as power continued to rest almost exclusively with a male academic elite.[104] Legal equality might have been achieved, but equal treatment in college life remained a distant aspiration for most of the twentieth century.[105] Indeed the consolidation of established inequalities in university education would become a notable (and under-researched) characteristic of the new Irish Free State.

Yet this should not detract from the striking achievement of women's educational activism within a divided society strongly attached to traditional gender roles. The women's colleges secured a distinctive niche in higher education due to the leadership of pioneering activists from different religious contexts but sharing a commitment to educational opportunities for middle-class women. The Janus-faced character of the Royal University, which included female students in its examinations but sanctioned exclusion of women from endowments, offices and many educational settings, created a demand for alternative educational institutions which was met by the women's colleges. The colleges played a crucial part in opening university education to women, not least in providing 'a legitimate, collegial and protected environment' in which young women could experience college life.[106] The early influence of Protestant educational activists in Dublin and Belfast helped to provoke a competitive mobilisation by Catholic religious orders who enjoyed ecclesiastical support.

The feminist campaign for equality of access to university colleges built on the achievement of the women's colleges but also rejected them as perpetuating inequality.[107] The IAWG developed an inter-denominational movement which successfully navigated sectarian divisions, no small achievement in early-twentieth--century Ireland. The women graduates also benefited from a more favourable political and cultural context due to the removal of restrictions on women's participation in higher education in Britain: while a wider upsurge of liberal social reform in the early 1900s facilitated legislative reform in Irish university education, its influence on achieving equality of access for women is less clear and deserves further exploration. Yet it is apparent that the IAWG's campaign for equality of access to university colleges faced significant opposition and was successful due to highly effective advocacy by an inter-confessional, feminist representative organisation which influenced important strands of elite opinion and overcame opposition from upholders of the status quo.

Notes

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