THE INFLUENCE OF ARISTOCRATIC WOMEN ON EARLY EDUCATION TOWARDS THE ERA OF "NEW WOMEN"

Edith-Hilde KAITER[6]

Abstract: *During the centuries, the education process was influenced not only by remarkable men but also by educated aristocratic women who supported it entirely by sponsoring or founding colleges, who later became famous and important universities in England, such as Pembroke College (founded in 1347 by Marie de St Pol, Countess of Pembroke). But soon after some strong and wealthy women managed to be involved in the growth of universities, this field remained an extremely male-orientated society and women's duty was only to focus on their role in the home.*

The hereby article presents the way in which women regained their right to education. The prefix 'new' was imposed on the feminist cause in the late 1800s and everything started to change.

Keywords: *aristocratic, women, university.*

The Influence of high-born women on the early colleges

Women, particularly those of the catholic faith, had an important influence over temporal affairs and their astonishing contribution to Cambridge University for example, was a remarkable one. Therefore, seven of the sixteen colleges that were in existence by the end of the sixteenth century had been founded by women. From 1290, when Edward I's wife Eleanor had bequeathed money for the benefit of poor scholars at Cambridge, women had a considerable influence on the development of the university. They were involved in the foundation of colleges, in their management and in the endowment of professors' chairs.

Typical of the wealthy and well-connected female college sponsors was Elizabeth de Clare. Her wealth came through inheritance: she was a grand-daughter of Edward I, her brother died without an heir at the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314 and she had buried three husbands before she was thirty. Through her wealth and influence the poorly endowed University Hall was refounded in 1338 as Clare Hall, doubtless to the relief of its founder Richard de Badew, Chancellor of the university. Within her heraldic lozenge, displayed at the college front gate, there is a circle of golden symbols. Some refer to them as tears for her three lost husbands, but they are more likely to represent her wish to spread 'the precious pearls of knowledge' to which she referred in the college's foundation charter.

Although, as was so often the case, there was a Cambridge academic of more modest social standing behind the founder of the college, Lady de Clare stayed closely involved with her institution's funding and direction. College archives reveal that in the early 1350s she was concerned over certain irregularities which later prompted her encouragement of a commission of enquiry to investigate further. These founders, therefore, did more than just lend their name: well-

∗ "Mircea cel Bătrân" Naval Academy Constanța, green_flower19@yahoo.com

BDD-A29844 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:13 UTC)

connected aristocrats, who could secure for the college the right of mortmain from a monarch or a bull from a pope to consecrate a chapel, were an essential ingredient behind a successful college foundation.

Another aristocratic lady, Marie de St Pol de Valence, founded the Hall of Marie Valence, later known as Pembroke College, in 1338. She belonged to the same Anglo-French ruling class as Lady de Clare. Unlike Lady de Clare, she was married only once: however, it has been suggested that she played the three roles of maid, bride and widow on her wedding day. The reality is less dramatic: her husband, Aymer de Valence, Earl of Pembroke, died not at a wedding day joust, but in northern France of apoplexy a few years after their marriage. Nonetheless, it was once again the combination of wealth, widowhood and court connections which was turned to the university's advantage. Her influence is shown through the college articles, which state the preference was to be given to scholars born in France, 'if such could be found': she also required that those observed drinking to excess or frequenting brothels were to be reported by their peers.

Although college archives reveal a typical amount of scholarly misbehaviour, they divulge little evidence of Frenchmen as members of college. Indeed, Pembroke was eventually to nurture William Pitt the Younger, who laid the foundations for the defeat of Napoleon's France: his statue has been placed in front of the college library and the Pitt Building stands almost opposite the college's front gate. The name of Marie de Valence lives on in small ways, from remembrance in chapel services and toasts at hall feasts to the moniker 'V' painted, to the mystery of many junior college members, on college bicycles.

After five colleges were set up in the mid-1300s, there was a period of almost 100 years in which no colleges were founded. The reputation of a medieval university depended on the number of scholars it could attract and Henry VI's foundation of King's College in 1441 paid scant attention to the needs of the university: at the outset he planned for there to be only twelve scholars. It was a woman – Margaret of Anjou, the wife of King Henry VI – who met the need of the university to expand at this time. The new college, ultimately to be known as Queen's College, was formed in 1448 from an existing student hostel known as the College of St Bernard. The principal of the hostel, Andrew Docker, became the first head of the new college. The new foundation was charged to conserve 'the Faith'. College articles also directed that daily lectures be held to support 'the magnificence….of Queen's College…and to laud and honour of sex feminine…'

Queen's has never interpreted the wishes of its first patroness as a requirement to adopt a corporate mission statement promoting women's interests. Indeed, it does not even have a record of support for women at the university. On formal occasions in college, its presidents sometimes remark on this irony with rueful reference to the 500 years that passed before women were permitted to study there. Their exclusion of women over many centuries would not have surprised Margaret of Anjou, however. Her reference in the college articles to women's honour probably reflected her wish for women to be remembered in the liturgy during chapel, acknowledging that they could be saints and powerful intercessors with God.

Queen's acquired two further queen-patronesses as a result of the Wars of the Roses. Margaret of Anjou was forced out of the country when the Lancastrian fortunes stumbled and was succeeded as college patroness by Edward IV's wife, Elizabeth Woodville. The third queen who became college sponsor was Anne

BDD-A29844 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:13 UTC)

Neville, wife of Richard III. Centuries later this abundance of *queens* was used to justify the shift of the apostrophe in the college's name.

During Richard III's reign the royal couple endowed the college magnificently: indeed, Richard had made his first endowment of the college early in the reign of his brother. After Richard's demise at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485 Henry VII confiscated those gifts, but briefly Queen's had been the university's richest college. Richard and Anne are remembered twice a year at the college's Commemoration of Benefactors service, apparently to the accompaniment of quiet cheers at the mention of Richard's name and moderate boos for the king who removed the college's wealth. Queen's also adopted as one of its two main shields of arms the silver boar's head used by Richard as his personal badge. On formal occasions the college refers with pride to its three royal patronesses – but, surprisingly in this context, they are usually named as Margaret Anjou, Elizabeth Woodville and Elizabeth II. Anne is rather overlooked.

Memorials to Richard III also exist within the town's landmarks. Great St. Mary's contains a small commemoration of this Yorkist king within a Victorian stained glass window in the north-west corner, marking his support of the church's medieval restoration. The universe was well supported by Richard – besides his interest in Queens' he also funded King's College Chapel more promptly and willingly than did either his brother Edward or his Tudor successors. But proper acknowledgement of this is, perhaps predictably given the subsequent success of the Tudors, hard to find in Cambridge.

Queens' college had no official patroness between Anne Neville in 1485 and Elizabeth, the wife of George VI, in 1948, who accepted the role on the occasion of the college's quincentennial celebrations of that year. However, both Lady Margaret Beaufort and Catherine of Aragon probably enjoyed an unofficial involvement with the college. Although all the sixteen oldest colleges have patron saints, only King's and Queen's have secured the support of living patrons. The patrons of the old colleges were sometimes monastic houses which were not replaced when their direct involvement with Cambridge ended at the time of their repression.

Another rich and widowed aristocratic lady, Anne Neville, the dowager duchess of Buckingham, refounded a college in the 1470s at the time Queens' was acquiring and discarding its female patrons. There is some doubt as to whether it was she or her grandson, Henry Stafford, the second duke, who supported the foundation of Buckingham Hall (later Magdalene College), but it is now thought most probable that credit should be given to the dowager duchess. She was also the mother-in-law of the next great widowed aristocratic lady who assisted Cambridge so much: Lady Margaret Beaufort. Founder of both Christ's and St. John's colleges in the early 1500s, Lady Margaret had also given support in the 1490s to John Alcock, the founder of Jesus College.

The involvement of women with St. John's continued into Stuart England. Mary, Countess of Shrewsbury, financed the building of Second Court; her statue was placed on the west range above the gatehouse in 1671. She was the daughter of the better-known Countess of Shrewsbury, Bess of Hardwick, who had acquired the wealth which ultimately benefited the college. Bess was married and widowed four times and it was her second marriage, to William Cavendish, that produced Mary, whose descendants helped develop Cambridge as a centre of science.

BDD-A29844 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:13 UTC)

Sidney Sussex College was the last of the oldest colleges to be founded by a woman. Its founder, Lady Frances Sidney, actually died in 1589, seven years before the college came into existence, but funded the college through the terms of her will. She was the widow of the earl of Sussex.

The contribution of these aristocratic women is remarkable; nothing similar occurred at Oxford. It was clerics, monarchs or chancellors who generally founded medieval colleges, yet at Cambridge women with strong personalities and great wealth wished to be involved in the growth of the university. Furthermore, the academics, determined to expand the university through founding colleges, demonstrated that they could, time and again, attract the support of those at the heart of the regime.

The exclusion of women from the daily life of the university

Nonetheless, the university remained an extremely male-oriented society, whose chauvinism lingered well into the twentieth century. Although this had much to do with the monastic influence on the university, it also reflected English society. A woman's duty was to focus on her role in the home; this made her unsuitable for the worldly matters on which education was focused. Cambridge University, as so often, conformed to the values of time.

For centuries women had no place in daily life at the university. Even female visitors to colleges were very rare; they could not pass beyond the communal areas, while often the only person permitted to receive a female non-relative was the head of college. However, the existence long ago of a scale of punishments at Peterhouse for breaking these rules suggests that breaches must have occurred; the college even instructed its medieval fellows to ensure that their heads were washed only by males. As late as 1801 the first British population census recorded the remarkable imbalance of 803 males and 8 females in the university, the latter presumably the spouses of college heads.

At times even service roles within the university have been denied to women. In the 1500s King's College ruled that all its domestic servants had to be male; another university edict in 1635 forbade women under the age of fifty 'to make beds or perform any other service within the scholars' chambers'. Unsurprisingly, laundry remained the responsibility of women, but soiled garments would have been left for collection at the college gate. Women were eventually employed as bedders, but there is fortunately no evidence to support the unkind notion that selection was based on their having an unattractive physical appearance. The sentiment of some classics scholars that these women must be 'senex et horrid ex aetate' – 'an old woman who time had rendered hideous'- has no basis in fact. Nonetheless, most of the female college staff were of an age which made sexual liaisons between them and the scholars improbable.

The culture which required celibacy and distance from women lasted for centuries. Consequently pretty, and less pretty, barmaids throughout the many pubs in Cambridge have long received exceptional attention from the university's scholars.

It seems hardly necessary to add that women were also excluded from the university as students; but this did not leave them all bereft of education. The country's leading families, both noble and bourgeois, had traditionally arranged private education by tutors at home for both their sons and daughters. In Tudor

BDD-A29844 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:13 UTC)

times, for example, Robert Ascham had taught Elizabeth I, while other women, such as Lady Jane Grey, Katherine Parr and Thomas More's daughter, Margaret, won wide intellectual acclaim. However, the vast majority of less privileged women had no access to education.

The injustice of this situation became more intolerable as the wealth and the population of the country grew, and by the mid-1800s colleges for women, such as Queen's and Bedford, had opened in London. Towards the end of the nineteenth century similar pressures led to the creation of the all-female colleges of Newnham and Girton. The small number of women who studied there were technically 'townsmen', as they were not accepted as members of the university. Both colleges nonetheless represented a very significant step towards ending the exclusion of women from higher education at Cambridge.

Passing unnoticed

The critical first breach by women of the male-dominated university came in 1871, when Henry Sidgwick, a liberal professor in philosophy at Trinity College, leased a house for a few women at No. 74 Regent Street. This was the precursor of Newnham College, over which Sidgwick's friend Anne Clough later took charge.

Even Sidgwick remarked of the first five students that they were of 'unfortunate appearance'- they were too attractive and fashionable 'to pass unnoticed', as he chose to express one of the early demands made on women at the university. At that time the idea of young women living away from home was more scandalous than the fact of them being educated – and any whiff of scandal would have delayed the prospect of female education.

The seed which grew into second college for women at Cambridge had been planted during 1869 in Hitchin, Hertfordshire, by Emily Davies, with the help of the liberal element among Cambridge's dons. This was a safe thirty miles from the university, but the difficulty of studying a wide range of subjects with the limited teaching resources available in Hitchin prompted a move to Girton, within two miles of Cambridge, in 1873. Miss Davies considered her Girton College to be superior to the establishment at Newnham and the two women's colleges rapidly acquired the two characteristics of snobbism and mutual mistrust which some older colleges had spent centuries honing.

Miss Davies mistrusted Miss Clough particularly for her lack of determination in the fight to extract degrees from the university for their young women, condemning the Newnham people as representing 'the serpent eating away at our vitals'. About the students of each college she wrote: 'Girton is for ladies, while Newnham is for governesses'. Doubtless she was happy with the popular contention that the ladies of Girton wore stays while the members of Newnham went about town unlaced. Miss Clough, on the other hand, was more concerned to educate women as teachers, seeing cohorts of female teachers as the best means of challenging the subjugated status of women.

The foundation of these two colleges was only the beginning of women's struggle to secure fair access to higher education, however, and male prejudice still denied equal treatment to those who had been brave enough to breach the male citadel. Some educational facilities, for example, remained out of bounds to the girls: their use of the university's library was restricted, their presence at lectures

BDD-A29844 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:13 UTC)

was limited and they were excluded from competing for university prizes and scholarships.

The services of the eminent Victorian architect Basil Champneys were secured to design Newnham College in the 1870s. The college is built in the Queen Anne Revival style typical of the late Victorian period; its Dutch gables and stone quoins, along with the rejection of enclosed courts, creates a more welcoming feel than is usually found at the older colleges. Another characteristic of old colleges was challenged through the undergraduates' rooms being accessed from long corridors, as opposed to the multiplicity of staircases leading to a few rooms seen in the older colleges. But when the land for this adventure into women's education was leased from St. John's, its fellowship clearly felt little confidence in the project as they tried to stipulate that only substantial cottages be built, which could have been converted to residential homes should the experiment have failed.

Newnham still has a building in its grounds which was originally used as a laboratory. It had been thought inappropriate for the college's young ladies to spend the long hours required by many scientific experiments in close proximity to the other sex and the well-equipped Cavendish Laboratory was thus out of bounds to women. A perverse benefit of this restriction has been that some of the Newnham science equipment, no longer needed once the sexes could mix more freely, has been preserved. Typical of a late-nineteenth-century laboratory, it is on display at the Whipple Museum of the History of Science in Free School Lane.

Distrust as to the motives of these early Cambridge female undergraduates, who merely wished to receive an education, was widespread. Many thought of them, unfairly, as little different to the 'fishing fleet' of middle-class young women who sailed out annually to India looking for husbands among the army officers and business wallahs in the days of the English Raj.

New women and bicycles

From these small beginnings it took over 100 years to establish full membership, co-educational colleges and then numerical equality between female and male students. The modest progress made by women in the 1870s simply reflected the changing position of women in society, which had been triggered by legislation such as the 1870 Women's Property Act. Those directing the university did not embrace the cause of women's rights; illiberal as ever, they responded belatedly and with reluctance.

Opposition to the advance of women's interests was strong. For example, after a Senate debate on women's education in 1865 the eminent geologist Adam Sedgwick, in a conversation recorded by John Willis Clark, referred to the young girls who might be interested in taking the Local Examinations set by Cambridge for the country's secondary schools as 'nasty forward minxes'. Even the Liberal leader W.E. Gladstone, whose daughter was at Newnham in the late 1870s, could speak of how the granting of further rights would 'trespass on the delicacy, the purity, the refinement in the nature of women'. With such opposition from the liberal end of the political spectrum, the steps along the path towards equality were destined to be painfully slow. The conservative academics closed ranks against women's participation in all aspects of university life: as late as 1932 the university's comedians performing at the Footlights were almost forced to close their acting club after employing professional actresses in the female roles of their

BDD-A29844 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:13 UTC)

productions. It took a few more years before the female undergraduates themselves were able to perform on stage.

The prefix 'new' was imposed on the feminist cause in the late 1800s and used in Cambridge because of its pejorative overtones. 'New' has rarely been a flattering prefix for any social or political movement: Catholics at the time of the Reformation had popularized the term 'New Learning' as an abusive description of protestant theological belief. As a term of opprobrium, 'New' was even caught up with the Labour Party in twenty-first-century Britain, despite having initially been used by the party itself to suggest its own regeneration. Conversely, through the importance given to Classical culture and the acceptance that wisdom was acquired with age, 'Old' was a term of respect. The term 'New Woman' was thus an insult. *Punch* portrayed the 'New Woman' as bored who were never quiet; in the one article of 1894 the magazine referred to them as living off a diet of only 'foolscap and ink'.

Interestingly, in a place such as Cambridge, which has shown such an interest in velocipedes, bicycles became a symbol of the New Woman. The birth of the women's emancipation movement coincided with the wider use of these machines and women fully appreciated the greater freedom they brought. When the Senate discussed whether to admit women as full members of the university during 1897, it was an effigy of a woman on a bicycle which protestors chose to suspend from the first floor of the ancient Trinity Street bookshop opposite the Senate. Some men celebrated the denial of full membership on this occasion by an assault on the Newnham entrance of Newnham College.

The life of a female undergraduate long after the late 1800s cannot have been easy. They were isolated through restrictions which had never been imposed on male members of the university even in medieval times. It is telling that the first of the three main entrances which Newnham College used required the girls wishing to leave college to walk some distance in the opposite direction from the town in order to reach its centre.

By then, however, discipline had clearly slipped, as the girls were allowed to invite men to the occasional tennis party on the grass courts to the north of Old Hall. Portions of the tennis pavilion could be booked for teas. Tennis Teas evidently became a bit of a wheeze to entertain favoured male friends, as they were soon referred to as 'Tennis Tea Parties without Tennis'. The citadel of Girton, two miles away from the dangers of the town, remained more difficult to breach.

Another symbol of the invisibility many men at Cambridge thought appropriate for women came about as a result of the tragic death in 1893 of the brilliant electrical engineer John Hopkinson in an Alpine climbing accident, along with one of his sons and two of his daughters. His widow founded a new Engineering in Free School Lane, which has upon it a commemorative plaque. The inscription, which can be read from the pavement, acknowledges the father and his son, but, astonishingly, excludes his two daughters. It is possible that the son's name was included because he had already been accepted, though had not matriculated, at Trinity; nonetheless the exclusion of his sisters from the plaque is difficult to understand from a twenty-first-century perspective.

From the beginning, obviously, there were some women who excelled at their studies. A few years after 1881, the year in which the Tripos exams had been unofficially opened to women, a Girton student, Agnata Ramsey, achieved the top Classics degree. It provoked *Punch* to publish another celebrated cartoon: two

BDD-A29844 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:13 UTC)

male railway guards bowing to her as she entered a First Class railway carriage. Similarly, in 1890 Philippa Fawcett, from Newnham College, achieved a higher mark than the top mathematics Wrangler. From 1882, the women of Girton and Newnham could sit mock exams which were marked by the more liberal academics. None, apparently, was more willing to help than Professor Canon Kennedy, once known better to many schoolchildren as the author of the famous *Revised Latin Primer*.

Appositely, it seems to have been Kennedy's daughters who transformed his original work – hence the *Revised* – into the popular text still occasionally used in schools offering classics today. Another professor, Henry Sidgwick, permitted women to attend his lectures. The majority, however, resisted the advance of women. The first female lecturer at Cambridge, Ellen McArthur, who taught Economic History at Girton, was not appointed until 1894. An endowment created by her will still fund lectures and research positions.

Progress for women at Cambridge was slow in comparison with the more liberal universities in Scotland and Wales, as well as the English universities of London and Durham. By the 1890s those universities offered full degrees to women. Perversely, some at Cambridge then argued that since women had access to higher education in those places, there was no need for change at their own institution; the further argument that Cambridge would lose 'the best male scholars' to Oxford was also used. Doubtless, the same argument was aired at Oxford.

Homerton, which achieved full college status only in 2009, was the first place of co-education associated with the university. It moved to Cambridge from London's East End in the 1890s, where it had been a mixed college dedicated to the training of teachers. Homerton, as Miss Clough of Newnham had argued, advanced the cause of women's education through addressing the lack of female teachers. Homerton's initial attempt at co-education in Hills Road was not a success; its records contain references to some of the more proper young ladies complaining both that 'they could not speak freely in front of men' and that some of their own sex 'forgot themselves'. Others commented that the men forgot that women did not come to lectures to be 'made eyes at'. Centuries of separation had left huge potential for misunderstanding on both sides. Men had made up 30 of the 130-strong student body at the time of the move from London, but a few years in Cambridge was sufficient for the college to return to single-sex education, choosing to educate only women.

However, the pressure for change continued, particularly as more women joined the university community through marriage. Fellows had been allowed to marry since 1860 at some colleges – the Caius fellowship was the first college to use this freedom, many of the other colleges retain the statutes which required celibacy for a further twenty years. The Caius fellows were perhaps helped by the fact that their Master, Dr Guest, had himself married in 1859, when the statute revisions were being drafted. The Royal Commission set up in 1877 finally agreed statutes in 1882 which permitted all fellows to marry. Nonetheless, some heads of colleges tried to maintain the ancient exclusion from their fellowship of all matters feminine. Dr George Corrie, Master of Jesus for thirty-six years from 1849, expressed his confidence to the Jesus fellowship that none of them would take advantage of the statute. In a refreshing example of the limitations of a master's authority, it is recorded that one fellow then married after a fortnight, some others

BDD-A29844 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:13 UTC)

within twelve months and virtually the entire Jesus fellowship had taken marriage vows within a few years. Once marriage had been deemed acceptable the prospects for proper co-education must have subtly changed. Furthermore, the centuries-old bachelor accommodation in college, which could not reasonably house new spouses, must have either caused marital disharmony or prompted moves out to the newly built villas to the west of the Backs.

Beyond bringing a much-needed female balance to the often hermetically sealed masculine culture of a college fellowship, the marriage of dons had another impact. For centuries the genes of clever academics had had no legitimate outlet. The celibacy of its staff over centuries must have been of incalculable loss to the nation's gene pool; rich bachelor dons' bequests of their estates to their college hardly compensated.

Bibliography

Chrimes, Nicholas, *Cambridge: Treasure Island in the Fens, The 800-year story of the university and town of Cambridge, 1209-2009*, Second Edition, London, 2012.

BDD-A29844 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:13 UTC)