

A Girl's Place at Dalhousie College, 1896

by Lucy Maud Montgomery

This addition to our archives section of Atlantis was written by Canadian author Lucy Maud Montgomery in 1896. Her treatment of women's education elsewhere, in the novels Anne of Avonlea and Anne of the Island which describe Anne Shirley's experience of College in Nova Scotia and her early teaching career, is disappointing to feminists. In concentrating on Anne's romantic aspirations to find a mate who would suit all the vagaries of her imagination and personality. She was writing quickly to please her publisher and her reading audience. She herself said of Anne of Avonlea that "I wrote it, not because I wanted to but because my publisher insisted."

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Lucy Maud Montgomery's own aspirations and concerns at Dalhousie College in 1896 were closer to her original concept of Anne as the independent and responsible young woman who emerges from her first novel Anne of Green Gables (1908). In April of 1896 she wrote this piece for the Halifax Herald on the state of higher education for women in Nova Scotia. Here we see the pride and independence of her spirit.

We hope our readers enjoy this glimpse into an unacknowledged aspect of the concerns of Lucy Maud Montgomery for the treatment of women in education.

"Why, sirs, they do all this as well
as we."

* * * * *

"Girls,
Knowledge is now no more a fountain
sealed;
Drink deep until the habits of the
slave,
The sins of emptiness, gossip and
spite,
And slander, die. Better not be at
all
Than not be noble."

* * * * *

"Pretty were the sight,
If our old halls could change their
sex and flaunt

With prudes for proctors, dowagers
for deans,
And sweet girl graduates in their
golden hair."

Tennyson--"The Princess."

It is not a very long time, as time goes in the world's history, since the idea of educating a girl beyond her "three r's" would have been greeted with up lifted hands and shocked countenances. What! Could any girl, in her right and proper senses, ask for any higher, more advanced education than that accorded her by tradition and custom? Could any girl presume to think that the attainments of her mother and grandmother before her, insufficient for her? Above all, could the dream of opposing her weak feminine mind to the mighty masculine intellect which had been dominating the world of knowledge from a date long preceding the time when Hypatia was torn to pieces by a mob of Alexandria?

"Never," was the approved answer to all such questions. Girls were "educated" according to the standard of the time. That is they were taught reading and writing and a small smattering of foreign languages; they "took" music and were trained to warble pretty little songs and instructed in the mysteries of embroidery and drawing. The larger proportion of them, of course, married, and we are quite ready to admit that they made

none the poorer wives and mothers because they could not conjugate a Greek verb or demonstrate a proposition in Euclid. It is not the purpose of this article to discuss whether, with a broader education, they might not have fulfilled the duties of wifehood and motherhood equally well and with much more of ease to themselves and others.

Old traditions die hard and we will step very gently around their death bed. But there was always a certain number of unfortunates--let us call them so since the world would persist in using the term--who, for no fault of their own probably, were left to braid St. Catherine's tresses for the term of their natural lives; and a hard lot truly was theirs in the past. If they did not live in meek dependence with some compassionate relative, eating the bitter bread of unappreciated drudgery, it was because they could earn a meagre and precarious subsistence in the few and underpaid occupations then open to women. They could do nothing else! Their education had not fitted them to cope with any and every destiny; they were helpless straws, swept along the merciless current of existence.

If some woman, with the courage of her convictions, dared to make a stand against the popular prejudice, she was sneered at as a "blue-stocking," and prudent mothers held her up as a warning example to their pretty, frivolous daughters, and looked askance at her

as a not altogether desirable curiosity.

But, nowadays, all this is so changed that we are inclined to wonder if it has not taken longer than a generation to effect the change. The "higher education of women" has passed into a common place phrase.

A girl is no longer shut out from the temple of knowledge simply because she is a girl; she can compete, and has competed, successfully with her brother in all his classes. The way is made easy before her feet; there is no struggle to render her less sweet and womanly, and the society of to-day is proud of its "sweet girl-graduates."

If they marry, their husbands find in their wives an increased capacity for assistance and sympathy; their children can look up to their mothers for the clear-cut judgment and the wisest guidance. If they do not marry, their lives are still full and happy and useful; they have something to do and can do it well, and the world is better off from their having been born in it.

In England there have been two particularly brilliant examples of what a girl can do when she is given an equal chance with her brother; these are so widely known that it is hardly necessary to name them. Every one has read and heard of Miss Fawcett, the brilliant mathematician, who came out ahead of the senior wrangles at

Cambridge, and of Miss Ramsay, who led the classical tripos at the same university.

In the new world, too, many girl students have made for themselves a brilliant record. Here, every opportunity and aid is offered to the girl who longs for the best education the age can yield her. There are splendidly equipped colleges for women, equal in every respect to those for men; or, if a girl prefers co-education and wishes to match her intellect with man's on a common footing, the doors of many universities are open to her. Canada is well to the front in this respect and Dalhousie college, Halifax, claims, I believe, to have been the second college in the Dominion to admit girl students, if we can use the word "admit" of an institution which was never barred to them. Girls, had they so elected, might have paced, with notebook and lexicon, Dalhousie's classic halls from the time of its founding. When the first application for the admission of a girl to the college was received, the powers that were met together in solemn conclave to deliberate thereon, and it was found that there was nothing in the charter of the college to prevent the admission of a girl.

Accordingly, in 1881 two girls, Miss Newcombe and Miss Calkin, were enrolled as students at Dalhousie. Miss Calkin did not complete her course, but Miss Newcombe did and graduated in 1885

with honors in English and English history,--the first of a goodly number who have followed in her footsteps. Miss Newcombe afterwards became Mrs. Trusman and is now on the staff of the Halifax Ladies' college. In 1882 Miss Stewart entered, took the science course and graduated in 1886 as B.Sc. with honors in mathematics and mathematical physics.

In 1887 three girls graduated, Miss Forbes and Miss MacNeill each took their degree of B.A., the latter with high honors in English and English history. The third, Miss Ritchie, the most brilliant of Dalhousie's girl graduates took her B.L., she then took her Ph.D., at Cornell university and is now associate professor of philosophy in Wellesley college. Then occurs a hiatus in the list, for we find no girls graduating till 1891 when there were four who received their degrees, Miss Goodwin, Miss McNaughton and Miss Baxter in arts; Miss Muir took her degree of B.L.

In 1892 Miss Baxter, who had graduated with high honors in mathematics and mathematical physics, took her degree of M.A., after which she went to Cornell and there gained a Ph.D.

Miss Muir took her M.L., in 1893 and has since been studying for a Ph.D., at Cornell. In 1892 three girls, Miss Weston, Miss Archibald and Miss Harrington, obtained their B.A. degree.

Miss Archibald graduated with great distinction and took her M.A. in 1891. Afterwards she went to Bryn Mawr college, winning a scholarship at her entrance. Miss Harrington graduated with high honors in English and English literature and became M.A. in 1894. She also won a scholarship at Bryn Mawr, where she is at present studying.

In 1893 the two girl graduates were Miss McDonald and Miss Murray, the latter of whom took high honors in philosophy and is now on the staff of the Ladies college. The graduates of 1894 were Miss Hebb, B.A., Miss Hobrecker, B.A., Miss Jameison, B.A., and Miss Ross, B.A. Miss Hobrecker took honors in English and German. Miss Jameison and Miss McKenzie each took their M.A. in 1895. Miss Ross graduated with high honors in mathematics and mathematical physics. In 1895 three girls graduated B.A. Miss McDonald took honors in mathematics and mathematical physics; Miss Ross was the second Dalhousie girl to graduate with "great distinction," and takes her M.A. this year. Miss Bent is at present studying for her M.A.

It will be seen, from those statements, that, out of the twenty-five girls who have graduated from Dalhousie, nearly all have done remarkably well in their studies, and attained to striking success in their examinations. This, in itself, testifies to their ability to

compete with masculine minds on a common level. This year there is a larger number of girls in attendance at Dalhousie than there has been in any previous year. In all, there are about fifty-eight, including the lady medical students. Of course, out of these fifty-eight a large proportion are not undergraduates. They are merely general students taking classes in some favorite subject, usually languages and history.

In all, there are about twenty-nine undergraduate girls in attendance this session. The number of girls in the freshman class is the largest that has yet been seen at Dalhousie. Out of the twenty-six girls, at whom disdainful sophs are privileged to hurl all the old jokes that have been dedicated to freshmen since time immemorial, there are nine undergraduates. In the second year are eleven girls, eight of whom are undergraduates; and in the third year six out of the nine girls are also undergraduates.

There are also nine girls in the fourth year, seven of whom graduate this session. This is the largest class of girls which has yet graduated from Dalhousie. Several of these are taking honors and will, it is expected, amply sustain the reputation which girl students have won for themselves at the university. No girl has as yet attempted to take a full course in law

at Dalhousie. Not that any one doubts or disputes the ability of a girl to master the mysteries of "contracts" or even the intricacies of "equity jurisprudence;" but the Barristers' act, we believe, stands ruthlessly in the way of any enterprising maiden who might wish to choose law for a profession.

However, we did hear a different reason advanced not long ago by one who had thought the subject over. He was a lawyer himself, by the way, so no one need bring an action against us for libel. "Oh, girls," he said, "Girls were never cut out for lawyers." "They've got too much conscience." We have been trying ever since to find out if he were speaking sarcastically or in good faith.

But, if shut out from the bar, they are admitted to the study and practise of medicine and two girls have graduated from the Halifax medical college as full fledged M.D.'s. One of these, Miss Hamilton, obtained her degree in 1894 and has since been practising in Halifax. In 1895 Miss McKay graduated and is now, we understand, practising in New Glasgow. There are at present three girl students at the medical college. One will graduate this year; of the other two, one is in the third, and one in the first year.

Dalhousie is strictly co-educational. The girls enter on exactly the same

footing as the men and are admitted to an equal share in all the privileges of the institution. The only places from which they are barred are the gymnasium and reading room. They are really excluded from the former, but there is nothing to keep them out of the reading room save custom and tradition. It is the domain sacred to masculine scimmages and gossips and the girls religiously avoid it, never doing more than cast speculative glances at its door as they scurry past into the library. We have not been able to discover what the penalty would be if a girl should venture into the reading room. It may be death or it may be only banishment for life.

The library, however is free to all. The girls can prowl around there in peace, bury themselves in encyclopedias, pore over biographies and exercise their wits on logic, or else they can get into a group and carry on whispered discussions which may have reference to their work or may not.

They take prominent part in some of the college societies. In the Y.M.C.A. their assistance is limited to preparing papers on subjects connected with missions and reading them on the public nights; in the Philomathic society they are more actively engaged. The object of this society is to stimulate interest and inquiry in literature, science and philosophy. Girls are elected on the executive

committee and papers on literary subjects are prepared and read by them throughout the session.

They are also initiated into the rites and ceremonies of the philosophical club and are very much in demand in the Glee club. Once in a while, too, a girl is found on the editorial staff of the Dalhousie Gazette, and what the jokes column would do, if stripped of allusions to them, is beyond our comprehension.

The athletic club, however, numbers no girls among its devotees and it does not seem probable that it will--certainly not in this generation, at least. The question of the higher education of girls involves a great many interesting problems which are frequently discussed but which time alone can solve satisfactorily. Woman has asserted her claim to an equal educational standing with man and that claim has been conceded to her. What use then, will she make of her privileges? Will she take full advantage of them or will she merely play with them until, tired of the novelty, she drops them for some mere fad? every year since girls first entered Dalhousie, has witnessed a steady increase in the number of them in attendance; and it is to be expected that, in the years to come, the number will be very much larger. But beyond a certain point we do not think it will go. It is not likely that the day will ever come when the number of girl stu-

dents at Dalhousie, or at any other co-educational university, will be equal to the number of men. There will always be a certain number of clever ambitious girls who, feeling that their best life work can be accomplished only when backed up by a broad and thorough education, will take a university course, will work conscientiously and earnestly and will share all the honors and successes of their brothers. There will, however, always be a limit to the number of such girls.

Again, we have frequently heard this question asked: "Is it, in the end, worth while for a girl to take a university course with all its attendant expense, hard work, and risk of health?" How many girls, out of those who graduate from the universities, are ever heard of prominently again, many of them marrying or teaching school? Would not an ordinarily good education have benefited them quite as much? Is it then worth while, from this standpoint, for any girl who is not exceptionally brilliant, to take a university course?

The individual question of "worth while" or "not worth while" is one which every girl must scramble for herself. It is only in its general aspect that we must look at the subject. In the first place, as far as distinguishing themselves in after life goes, take the number of girls

who have graduated from Dalhousie--say thirty, most of whom are yet in their twenties and have their whole lives before them. Out of that thirty, eight or nine at the very least have not stood still but have gone forward successfully and are known to the public as brilliant, efficient workers. Out of any thirty men who graduate, how many in the same time do better or even as well? This, however, is looking at the question from the standpoint that the main object of a girl in taking a university course is to keep herself before the public as a distinguished worker. But is it? No! At least it should not be. Such an ambition is not the end and aim of a true education.

A girl does not--or, at least, should not--go to a university merely to shine as clever students take honors, "get through and then do something very brilliant." Nay; she goes--or

should go--to prepare herself for living, not alone in the finite but in the infinite. She goes to have her mind broadened and her powers of observation cultivated. She goes to study her own race in all the bewildering perplexities of its being. In short, she goes to find out the best, easiest and most effective way of living the life that God and nature planned out for her to live.

If a girl gets this out of her college course, it is of little consequence whether her after "career" be brilliant, as the world defines brilliancy, or not. She has obtained that from her studies which will stand by her all her life, and future generations will rise up and call her blessed, who handed down to them the clear insight, the broad sympathy with their fellow creatures, the energy of purpose and the self-control that such a woman must transmit to those who come after her.