The First Women Graduates

Anne Jane Bolton, who won the University of Sydney’s Fairfax Prize at the 1871 Senior Public Examination, was the first Australian woman graduate, though not of the University of Sydney. Her Arts degree was awarded by Canterbury University, New Zealand, in 1880, two years before women were admitted at Sydney.

The two first women to attend lectures at the University of Sydney were Mary Elizabeth Brown and Isola Florence Thompson, who graduated with Arts degrees in 1885. They went on to teach: Isola Thompson at Sydney Girls’ High School and Mary Brown at Brisbane Girls’ Grammar.

Then, in 1886, Jane Foss Russell completed her degree and became a presence on campus, paving the way for women’s full involvement in university life. Her graduation photo shows, despite her obvious youth, both determination and humour; two qualities that, coupled with her desire to further the cause and status of women’s education, led to her successful interaction with the University’s neighbouring community.

She supervised the first evening classes for underprivileged girls at the Harrington Street Night School, represented the school on the committee of the University Women’s Settlement and, with Louisa Macdonald, the first principal of the Women’s College, formed the Sydney University Women’s Association. From 1892 to 1899, she was Tutor to Women Students at the University. In 1899, she married H.E. Barff, for many years Registrar of the University, and, thereafter, continued to work for the underprivileged people of the areas adjacent to the University through her involvement with the University Women’s Settlement.

Those were the days of many “firsts” for women newly introduced into the hitherto masculine world of academic life in Sydney, but women attempting to enter the medical profession had a difficult time. The academic staff, all men, were convinced that the intimate discussion of the human body, necessary in the training of doctors, was not a fit topic for the ears of young ladies. Nevertheless, the Medical School at Sydney was the first in Australia to admit women when it allowed Dagmar Berne to enrol in 1884. Her path was not made easy. She was, according to some accounts, denied passes in key subjects in order to keep her from completing a degree. However this may have been, eventually she withdrew, and completed her studies in Edinburgh and Glasgow. On returning to Sydney, she set up practice in Macquarie Street, but died at an early age from tuberculosis, contracted during her stay in Scotland.

Iza Coghlan and Grace Fairley Robinson were more successful. They graduated in 1893, and, proving that women were suited to the study of medicine, Grace Robinson made her way through the course without a failure. Iza Coghlan was the first Sydney medical graduate to open a practice in the city, and became the first president of the NSW Medical Women’s Association. Later, she worked with the Sydney Medical Mission, founded in 1900 by another female medical graduate, Julia Carile-Thomass.

Grace Robinson followed a different course. She joined the Sydney Benevolent Asylum’s Maternity Hospital as a resident medical officer, after being refused a place at the Children’s Hospital despite her impeccable credentials. A newspaper report from the Freeman’s Journal, 30 December 1893 reports that, when she spoke of her election to the position with gratitude, she might have been nearer the mark if she had “characterized it as an instalment of justice which a cruel prejudice, masquerading under the guise of conventional property [sic], has
hitherto denied her sex. In 1912, she formed the Professional Women's Association for the improvement of social conditions for women and children in Sydney.

The first woman science graduate was Fanny Elizabeth Hunt, whose subsequent career was in teaching, and those immediately following her also pursued other than scientific paths. Most went on to teaching and a few to medicine. Sarah Hynes, who graduated in 1891, took a position with the government as a botanist, but, on the whole, women found it difficult to find work in science. The introduction of Science Research Scholarships in 1912 allowed some women to undertake further studies, with a view to obtaining junior academic posts (demonstrators and the like), but they had little opportunity of preferment in their profession either in the academic world or in industry. As late as the 1920s, women science graduates were continuing to accept careers outside their discipline.

The legal profession in Victoria admitted women from 1903. The other states soon followed, but in NSW there was no sign of relenting. Ada Evans, the first female Sydney Law graduate, received her LLB in 1902 knowing that legislation to allow women to practice would be a long time in coming because members of the profession were not inclined to give it their support. Miss Evans campaigned tirelessly for such legislation, and, in 1918, was, at last, successful. After two years of practical training, she was called to the NSW Bar in 1921. Not surprisingly, perhaps, she never practised as either a solicitor or a barrister, since, by that time, she was 49 years' old, in poor health, and was conscious of her long absence from the law. The first working woman solicitor was Marie Beuzeville Byles (BA 1921, LLB 1924) who had a successful legal practice in Eastwood from 1924 until she retired in 1971, and the first practising woman barrister was Sibyl Gibbs (LLB 1924). Their time at university was made difficult by the appalling behaviour of the male students, who caused noisy disruption in their classes, and by the intolerance of the lecturing staff. The fact that they graduated is a testament to their determination.

The movement of women into professional areas was slow and, it seems, for those involved, often wearing and unrewarded. Nevertheless, these people persisted in the face of all obstacles and pioneered the way for those who came after. Their stories make fascinating reading. The book by Bygott and Cable listed at the end of this article expands the matters discussed here, and the University of Sydney Archives holds material concerning many of the early women students. It is available to the public on request.

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