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## Harvard's WOMANLESS History

It's time to revise

# Harvard's WOMANLESS History

*Completing the University's self-portrait*

*by* LAUREL THATCHER ULRICH

IN THE OPENING PAGES OF *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf imagines her fictional self walking across the grass at a college she calls Oxbridge when a stern beadle in a cutaway coat intercepts her. His outraged face reminds her that only the "Fellows and Scholars" are allowed on the grass. A few minutes later, inspired by her reverie on a passage from Milton, she ascends the steps to the library. "Instantly there issued, like a guardian angel barring the way with a flutter of black gown instead of white wings, 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."

I thought of these passages late on a summer day in 1997, when I walked into the newly renovated Barker Center for the Humanities at Harvard. There was no living person to be seen in the grand public rooms, but everywhere I turned the eyes of long-dead men looked

*Portrait by Jim Harrison, photographs courtesy Radcliffe Archives, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University*

down at me from their portraits. "What are you doing here?" they seemed to be saying. "Have you a letter of introduction?" There was no room on these walls for ladies. Nine eminences, bewhiskered and stiff-collared, asserted the power of Harvard past.

At the gala dedication a few weeks later, the ghosts were less formidable. There were as many women as men in the crowd, and some of them were faculty members. Porter University Professor Helen Vendler gave a graceful dedicatory reading that included lines from Elizabeth Bishop and Adrienne Rich '51, LL.D. '90, as well as Lord Tennyson and Seamus Heaney, Litt.D. '98. Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences Jeremy Knowles said how pleased he was that both the chief architect and the project manager for the new Barker Center were women. The tone was light, but both speakers knew that something in the room needed exorcising.

I should have been reconciled, but as I started to leave the building, I felt a tug of something like responsibility. I was going to lecture on *A Room of One's Own* the following week, and I wanted to make sure I could come to terms with my own disquiet on my first visit to Barker Center. Seeing two young women with "Staff" badges near the entrance, I asked if there was someone who might be able to answer a question about the portraits. They pointed to a woman standing in a nearby doorway.

I approached her awkwardly, concerned about raising what might be perceived as a negative question on a day designed for celebration. The renovation was lovely, I told her, but I was puzzled by the portraits. Had the absence of women been discussed?

"Of course, it was discussed," she said briskly. "This is Harvard. Everything gets discussed."

Was she annoyed at me? At the question? Or at a situation that forced her to explain a decision she did not control?

I pushed on. If the issue had been discussed, I asked, what was said? She told me that there had been so much controversy about turning the old Freshman Union into the Barker Center that some people thought it was a good idea to keep some things just as they had been before.

"Besides," she continued, "Harvard doesn't have any portraits of women."

I was stunned by her certainty. "No portraits of women! Not even at Radcliffe?"

"No," she said firmly. "Nothing we could use."

As she walked away, she turned and said, over her shoulder, "*You can't rewrite history.*"

Maybe you can't, I thought, but that's my job description. You can blame the woman in Barker Center—and Virginia Woolf—for this essay. If I hadn't been preparing to teach *A Room of One's Own*, I might not have been so attuned to the subtle discriminations around me. If the woman in Barker Center hadn't tossed off her quip about history, I wouldn't have been provoked into learning more about Harvard's past.

MOST PEOPLE ASSUME that history is "what happened" in the long ago. Historians know that history is an account of what happened based on surviving evidence, and that it is shaped by the interests, inclinations, and skills of those who write it. Historians constantly rewrite history not only because we discover new sources of information, but because changing circumstances invite us to bring new questions to old documents. History is limited not only by what we *can* know about the past, but by what we *care* to know.

When I came here in 1995, I naively assumed that female students had been fully integrated into the University. I soon discovered ivy-covered partitions that divided the imaginative as well as the administrative life of the institution. My encounter with the woman in Barker Center epitomized the problem. Obviously, if Harvard had no portraits of women, it couldn't integrate women into a vision of the past that required portraits. But the woman's allusion to history told me that the real problem was

**Prior pages: Laurel Thatcher Ulrich in the Faculty Room of University Hall, where all but one of the portraits are of men; the Radcliffe College class of 1896. Archival images reproduced on this page show a 1964 student tour of Harvard Yard, a chemistry lab in the 1950s, assistant professor Alice Hamilton (appointed in 1919), and the Radcliffe basketball team of 1900.**

not missing artifacts but a curiously constricted sense of what belonged to Harvard's past. In the weeks that followed, I found the same narrow vision everywhere I turned.

The standard assumption was that female students were recent arrivals. Yet by any historical standard, that notion is absurd. Women were studying with Harvard faculty members at the "Harvard Annex" in 1879, 20 years before Henry Lee Higginson donated the money to build what was then called the Harvard Union (later to be transformed into Barker Center). Radcliffe College, chartered in 1894, predated the House system, the tutorial system, and most of the departments now resident in Barker Center. Because it never had its own faculty, its instructors—and sometimes its presidents—were drawn from the Harvard faculty. Radcliffe's history always has been an essential part of Harvard's history, yet few of our custodians of the past have acknowledged that.

Womanless history has been a Harvard specialty. The most egregious example is the glossy booklet handed to guests at the Barker Center dedication. This short history of the humanities at the University has nothing at all to say about Radcliffe's many distinguished graduates. With the exception of Elizabeth Barker, who with her husband, Robert R. Barker, funded the renovation, not a single woman is included in the text or its accompanying illustrations. All 11 of the artists and scholars pictured are male. Among the collection of artifacts from the various programs illustrated in the margins, only the poster from the committee on women's studies, with its announcement of a lecture by Maxine Hong Kingston, gives any indication that works by women are included in Harvard's humanities curriculum. Surprisingly, the illustration from the Center for Literary and Cultural Studies, known for its feminist scholarship, shows a composite picture of Henry VIII and Freud.

If the author of this brochure had wanted to write a history that was not only more gracious and inclusive but more accurate, there was plenty of source material to draw upon. That this was not done suggests that at some fundamental level the wall between Radcliffe and Harvard has been impenetrable. The brochure might have mentioned Gertrude Stein, A.B. 1898, as well as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, LL.D. 1859. It could have pictured Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Maxine Kumin '46 as well as Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Walter Piston '24, D.Mus. '52. And it could have included the fact that Henry Lee Higginson, the man whose portrait by John Singer Sargent commands the central foyer of Barker Center, was not only the founder of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the donor of the Union, but the first treasurer of Radcliffe College.

Class of 1896

*Harvard Observed*, the lively new history by John T. Bethell published last year in conjunction with the centennial of *Harvard Magazine*, also elides Radcliffe from Higginson's biography. In a color-illustrated, full-page account, Bethell identifies Higginson's wife as the "daughter of Professor Louis Agassiz," but says nothing about her step-mother, Elizabeth Cary Agassiz, the first president of Radcliffe College. Nor does he mention Agassiz in any other part of the book. Although Bethell does include women in his story, he gives short shrift to Radcliffe. The index has more references to Sissela Bok than to Mary Bunting and no citations at all for Radcliffe's early presidents except for Le Baron Russell Briggs—who is identified in several places as a faculty member and dean, but never as president of Radcliffe College.

Harvard may or may not be the world's greatest university, but it is certainly the nation's oldest, and no one who enters a dormitory, walks through the Yard, or sits in the library is allowed to forget it. But what the University chooses to celebrate about its past is highly selective. After the Barker Center dedication, I turned to the University's official Web page. There I discovered the "brief history of Harvard" that can still be found today as the "Introduction" to the "Harvard Guide" produced by the University

**Geneticist Mary Ingraham Bunting (below), Radcliffe College's president from 1960 to 1972, worked to help women graduates "participate more effectively in the intellectual life and work of their times" and to win women undergraduates like those shown access to the benefits of the Harvard House system.**

from the new Graduate School of Education underlines the fact that the school was "the first Harvard department to admit men and women on equal terms." In 1948, Helen Maud Cam "becomes the University's first tenured woman."

In the two other entries, there is a subtle—and no doubt unintentional—washing out of female activism. Here the contrast between the descriptions of women and related entries about men is striking. The "era of angry political activism" between 1966 and 1971 is symbolized in a photograph of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara trapped near Quincy House, but when the timeline pictures female students moving into Winthrop House in 1970, the prose turns cute. "The times, they are a-changing," it says, as though feminist agitation had nothing to do with this radical transformation in undergraduate life.

Most telling is the treatment of two incidents of labor conflict, one involving men, the other women. The male story from 1919 is all action. The verbs convey the drama: "Boston policemen strike. Lecturer Harold Laski, a political theorist, supports them. The Board of Overseers interrogates Laski. President A. Lawrence Lowell...defends him, but Laski departs for the London School of Economics." In contrast, the description of a 1954 labor conflict at Harvard is playful: "Biddies, more politely 'goodies,' cease making the beds of undergraduates. Their future has looked cloudy since 1950, when they mentioned a raise in pay. Former head cheerleader Roger L. Butler '51 had described daily maid service as Harvard's 'one last remnant of gracious living.'" Astonishingly, the illustration accompanying this entry appears to be from the nineteenth century. By the time we get to 1988 and the successful organization of the Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers, women have disap-

# The GREAT Debate

*by* HELEN LEFKOWITZ HOROWITZ

IN 1899 HARVARD PRESIDENT Charles William Eliot and Bryn Mawr president M. Carey Thomas attended the inauguration of the new president of Wellesley College, where Eliot gave the inaugural address and Thomas spoke at the president's luncheon.

Regarded as the most highly respected educational leader in the nation, the 65-year-old Eliot had transformed Harvard from a fine provincial college into a great university. Despite earlier hesitations about the suitability of higher education for women, at the time of his Wellesley speech Eliot was presiding over a Harvard that had made room for Radcliffe College and accepted its plans for expansion and development. He was about to appoint as its president Le Baron Russell Briggs, dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, who would greatly assist Radcliffe as it became visible and respectable in the University. Eliot, oddly, used the Wellesley inauguration to voice his doubts about offering the liberal arts to women.

"The so-called learned professions are very imperfectly open to women," he pointed out, "and the scientific professions are even less accessible; and society, as a whole, has not made up its mind in what intellectual fields women may be safely and profitably employed on a large scale." Although a man's college is clearly indispensable to society, he continued, those for women are still regarded as "luxuries or superfluities which some rather peculiar well-to-do girls desire to avail themselves of" or as a means of helping a "few exceptional girls" earn a living.

Women's colleges, therefore, should become schools of manners, Eliot averred, especially because women must rely on their "delicate qualities," rather than on their strength. He raised the possibility that, if they succeeded, women's institutions could lead the way in teaching men's colleges how to foster the proper behavior of young people. Women's colleges should also encourage religion, especially that favored by Congregational worship, avoiding the "gregarious religious excitement so unwholesome for young women."

Most importantly, according to Eliot, women's colleges should cease to imitate colleges for men. They should stop all competitive enticements to learning such as "grades, frequent examinations, prizes, and competitive scholarships," since women work hard without such goads. Then he stuck the knife home. Women's colleges should concentrate on an education that will not injure women's "bodily powers and functions." Eliot continued, "It remains to demonstrate what are the most appropriate, pleasing, and profitable studies for women, both from the point of view of the individual and the point of view of society; and this demonstration must be entirely freed from the influence of comparisons with the intellectual capacities and tastes of men. It would be a wonder, indeed, if the intellectual capacities of women were not at least as unlike those of men as their bodily capacities are."

Sitting in her academic robes as part of the ceremonial delegation, Thomas listened to Eliot's speech with mounting fury. Later she wrote to a friend, "Eliot disgraced himself. He said the traditions of past learning and scholarship were of no use to women's education, that women's words were as unlike men's as

M. Carey Thomas

THE SCHLESINGER LIBRARY, RADCLIFFE INSTITUTE, HARVARD UNIVERSITY

peared entirely. The union is represented by its campaign button, reading "We Can't Eat Prestige." There is no clue in the text that the leader of the union, Kris Rondeau, and most of the members were female.

Still, the decision to include Radcliffe students and female workers in the Harvard timeline is significant. *Harvard Observed* is also a great improvement on other recent Harvard histories. Bethell is best at pointing out the ironies in Harvard's treatment of women. Summarizing the achievements of Alice Hamilton, appointed to the medical-school faculty in 1919, he observes: "Hamilton's appointment did not entitle her to use the Faculty Club, sit on the Commencement platform, or apply for football tickets." His juicy tidbits from the old alumni magazines remind us that Harvard men, too, participated in the emancipation of women—though usually not with the support of the University administration. In 1911, when the Harvard Men's League for Woman Suffrage invited British suffragist Emmeline Pankhurst to speak in Sanders Theatre, the Corporation refused them the use of the hall. In 1963, undergraduate columnist Edward Grossman reported in the *Alumni Bulletin* that a reverse panty raid by Radcliffe students on John Winthrop House had "focused a cold, hard light on the most compelling problem in this community: the integration of Radcliffe into the academic and social company of Harvard, on equal terms and no eyebrows raised." The quote from Grossman is intriguing, but unfortunately we learn nothing at all about the Radcliffe women.

Class of 1931

their bodies, that women's colleges ought to be schools of *manners* and really was hateful."

In 1899, at age 42, Thomas had been president of Bryn Mawr College for five years. The first woman to earn a Ph.D. summa cum laude from the University of Zurich, she had spent her life trying to demonstrate that women's capacity of mind was equal to that of men and that women had a right to a man's education.

Thomas used the chapel talk that traditionally opened Bryn Mawr's college year to reply to Eliot. She began by accepting Eliot's statement that it was the mission of a college to teach manners: Bryn Mawr was to become a school of "good breeding....Manners do, as President Eliot says, matter immensely...."

Having established this, she went on to her central point. She attacked Eliot's premise that the world of knowledge "existing from the time of the Egyptians to the present existed only for men," and that therefore the curriculum and methods of men's colleges were no guide for women. This was, Thomas retorted, nonsense. "He might as well have told the president of Wellesley to invent a new Christian religion for Wellesley or new symphonies and operas, a new Beethoven and Wagner, new statues and pictures, a new Phidias and a new Titian, new tennis, new golf...in short, a new intellectual heavens and earth."

Thomas firmly believed women should take no separate courses, such as psychology or domestic science, to prepare them for life's tasks, nor should existing subjects be presented from a woman's point of view. Women's education must be identical to that of men. The life of the mind had no sex. As she later put it, "Science and literature and philology are what they are and inalterable." Although science and culture belong to women, they have been robbed of opportunity. "The life of the intellect and spirit has been lived only by men. The world of scholarship and research has been a man's world." Her task was to change that.

As women enter professions, the education they receive must be the same as men's. "Given two bridge-builders, a man and a woman, given a certain bridge to be built, and given as always the unchangeable laws of mechanics...it is simply inconceivable that the preliminary instruction given to the two bridge-builders should differ in quantity, quality, or method of presentation because while the bridge is building one will wear knickerbockers and the other a rainy-day skirt." The career paths of women and men must be identical. Because the world of knowledge is the same for both sexes, "the objects of competition are one and the same for both men and women—instructorships and professors' chairs, scholarly fame, and power to advance, however little, the outposts of knowledge."

In 1899, as Thomas confronted Eliot, she feared that acknowledgement of any difference between men and women and any accommodation of that difference in curriculum could threaten women's chances. She shared with her age—and with Eliot—a positivist belief in science. She believed that an education based on experimental methods could find the true patterns underlying language, build sound bridges, and cure typhoid fever. This education was to be open on equal terms to women and men.

Both Radcliffe and Bryn Mawr Colleges were determined to offer women the highest education available in 1899. Whatever doubts Eliot may have had, his actions were moving in a different direction. But his words and those of Thomas helped shape the ways that Americans understood the higher education of women at the turn of the century. When women stood at Harvard's gates and breached them more than a century ago, the words of Eliot and Thomas mattered a great deal.

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Charles William Eliot

HARVARD UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

"THE HISTORY OF MEN'S OPPOSITION to women's emancipation is more interesting perhaps than the story of that emancipation itself," Virginia Woolf wrote. Perhaps someday a student at one of the new women's colleges at Oxbridge might "collect examples and deduce a theory—but she would need thick gloves on her hands, and bars to protect her of solid gold." Why did Harvard persist for so long in its curious system of apartheid? Shall we attribute it to tradition? Testosterone? Or the fabled prudery of proper Boston?

In studying historical attitudes toward women, some historians find the concept of gender useful. In academic usage, the word *gender* is neither a euphemism for sex nor a synonym for women. It is a convenient term for describing the varied and continually changing ways people define maleness and femaleness. In sociological terms, gender is a system of ordering social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes. Put in more ordinary language, we could say that sex makes babies, gender manufactures pink and blue booties. Hence, gender is present even when women are not—perhaps especially so.

Gender is also, as historian Joan Scott has written, "a primary way of signifying relations of power." In certain settings—fishing boats, construction sites, and elite colleges come to mind—men have established their own importance precisely by the exclusion of women from their work. It is probably no accident that the period in which Harvard achieved its ascendancy was also a period of rigid gender separation. In 1899, when Henry Higginson donated $150,000 for the new Harvard Union, the men of Harvard and the women of Radcliffe dined, studied, and listened to lectures in different spaces. One could argue that Radcliffe was founded not so much to promote the education of women—which could have been accomplished through coeducation—as to protect the maleness of Harvard students. In the Harvard Union, the rugged virtues of Harvard men were symbolized in the antler chandelier that still hangs in Barker Center, in the masterful portraits of Theodore Roosevelt and Higginson, and in the inscribed names over the central doorway of the 11 Harvard men who died in the Spanish-American War. Gender made demands on men as well as women.

Gender norms also invited women to participate in male domination. Virginia Woolf was surely thinking of such arrangements when she wrote, "Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size." Our campuses are filled with such mirrors, from the Radcliffe gate on Garden Street given by Anna Lyman Gray "in Memory of her Husband, John Chipman Gray Teacher at Harvard Law School for 44 Years, Member of the Council of Radcliffe College from its Incorporation in 1894 until his death in 1915," to the greatest mirror of them all, Widener Library, offered to the University by a mother in memory of her son. In such a system women enlarged their own status by caring for the needs of men.

Today's undergraduates have a hard time understanding that hundreds of bright women lived happy and productive lives despite such assumptions. Some, of course, did not. In her famous fantasy about Shakespeare's sister, Woolf explored the costs of gender discrimination. Judith Shakespeare, born like her brother with a great gift, ran away from home, became pregnant by a London actor, and died in despair. Harvard history offers equally grim examples of unfulfilled genius. The Barker Center brochure described Henry Adams, A.B. 1858, as "a pioneering figure in the serious study of American history." What it didn't tell us was that his brilliant wife, Clover (born Marian Hooper), was for years an unacknowledged assistant in his research (it was her language skills, not his, that got him

**In the days before male and female undergraduates were trusted to share a library, Radcliffe students worked on the third floor of Fay House. The 1930 varsity swim team used the pool in the Radcliffe gym next door. But like Gertrude Stein, A.B. 1898 (right), all these women took the same courses as Harvard men.**

into Spanish archives). Clover Adams killed herself on December 6, 1885, "by swallowing the potassium cyanide she had used in developing photographs." She probably suffered from what we would today think of as clinical depression, but at least one factor in her growing despair, biographer Eugenia Kaledin concludes, was an "education that exposed her to so much—but did not want her to take any of it seriously." She belonged to what Alice James, the thwarted sister of another of the pictured luminaries in the Barker Center brochure, the great psychologist William James, M.D. 1869, called "hemmed-in humanity."

Such a history could be narrated at every gate of the College Yard, beginning with the west wall that commemorates the godly ministers who in the 1630s assured the survival of a learned ministry in Massachusetts by establishing Harvard College and by banishing the brilliant and recalcitrant Anne Hutchinson, a person who ultimately preferred the growing voice of God within to the authority of clerics. That is not, of course, the kind of history a donor would want to see printed in a glossy brochure.

But then neither would one want to include Henry Adams's own comment on Harvard education:

> Our men...cram themselves with second-hand facts and theories till they bust, and then they lecture at Harvard College and think they are the aristocracy of intellect and are doing true heroic work by exploding themselves all over a young generation, and forcing up a new set of simple-minded, honest prigs as like to themselves as two dried peas in a bladder.

Class of 1935

Virginia Woolf put the same idea more crisply as she contemplated the shut door of Oxbridge's library: "I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in."

Ironically, the most powerful tribute to the value of a Harvard education is in the stories of those who struggled for so many years to achieve it. If I were to choose an unsung hero whose story ought to be preserved for future generations, I would pick Abby Leach of Brockton, Massachusetts, who came to Cambridge in 1878 to ask three Harvard professors for instruction in Greek, Latin, and English. Her brilliance and enthusiasm changed their ideas about female education. Thirty years later, Leach, then head of the Greek department at Vassar College, spoke at Radcliffe's graduation. President Briggs exaggerated only slightly when he said, "No one can speak more fitly at a Radcliffe Commencement than she who was the Commencement of Radcliffe." John Harvard contributed books. Ann Radcliffe gave money. But Abby Leach offered Harvard the best gift of all—a passion for learning. Let's build a monument to her memory by rewriting Harvard's history. ▽

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**Abby Leach (left), who persuaded three Harvard professors to give her advanced instruction in Greek, Latin, and English, was known as the "nucleus" of Radcliffe College. The women who followed her moved from sharing only social occasions—like a 1941 tea—with Harvard students, to joining their male counterparts for Commencement in 1970.**