CHAPTER 4

Unfinished Business: Forgotten Histories of Women's Scholarship and the Shifting Status of Women's Education

Jean Barr

Abstract:

Lalage Bown championed women's education for women's personal empowerment and social progress. She insisted that such empowerment and progress always risk being lost and must be continuously defended and fought for. Part of this project involves remembering past creative achievements and struggles for women's rights to education and scholarship. The chapter therefore begins with a brief biography of Mary Somerville, the Scottish born scientist after whom the Oxford College attended by Lalage is named. Her name is now unknown to most people. This leads into a discussion of Lalage's history of *Women's scholarship, past and future* and belief that it has flourished where structures are less formal and there is a loosening of the 'strange clerical culture of science'. A case study of women's education in the West of Scotland in the 1980s follows to illustrate this view. Current narrowing of Adult Education's horizons, alongside threats to women's rights worldwide, is counterposed to Lalage's and bell hooks' vision for Adult Education as the 'practice of freedom'.

Keywords: Informality; Professionalisation; Women's Education; Women's Studies

Lalage Bown studied Modern History at Somerville College, graduating in 1949, and later taking an MA in Adult Education and Economic Development. Mary Somerville (1780-1872), the Scottish astronomer and mathematician after whom Lalage's college was named, is now almost completely forgotten, one of a legion of women creators who, though celebrated in their day, fade from public memory unless deliberately recalled years later. Somerville Hall, one of Oxford's first two women's colleges, was founded seven years after Mary's death: too late for her but not too late for Dorothy Hodgkin, winner of the 1964 Nobel Prize for Chemistry (and other alumnae such as Indira Gandhi, Margaret Thatcher and Iris Murdoch). Aptly, Dorothy Hodgkin's daughter, Elizabeth Hodgkin, nominated Lalage as the woman who inspired her most in an episode of BBC Radio 4's *Women's Hour* which was broadcast in 2017. In *The Chain*, Lalage talked about women's literacy work in Africa.

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Mary Somerville wrote explicitly to popularise science and to show how its various branches interconnect. Her book, *Physical Geography*, went through six editions, whilst *On the Connexion of the Physical Sciences*, published when she was 54, was a prescribed text at Cambridge University from which she and her daughters were excluded. She was also denied access to the Royal Society in London, with the result that in 1826 she had to deputise her husband to read her paper, "On the Magnetizing Power of the More Refrangible Solar Rays", the first paper by a woman ever delivered to that august body. The mother of six children, Mary's success as a scientist was assisted by the amateur status of science in early nineteenth century England. In Scotland, the pursuit of science as a profession was already more advanced (Reynolds 2006).

Somerville had spent her early life in Scotland and after a brief spell of married life in Edinburgh had settled in London, with frequent periods abroad, especially in Italy. Her autobiography gives no indication that she felt an outsider to the developing amateur-professional scientific network in the capital. Dorothy McMillan's comment on the 'gatekeepers' reception of her work seems astute: «It was», says McMillan, «probably her good fortune to be little and shy». Though hailed as the 'queen of science' in her day, Mary never lost her sense of inferiority, believing that as a woman she lacked creativity. She feared that «the mind, like the body, is gendered [...] by the body», recording in her diary, «In the climax of my great success [...] I was conscious [...] that I had no originality. [...] That spark from heaven is not granted to the sex» (2001, xxiii-xxv).

David Noble also quotes from Mary's diary in his book, *A World Without Women*: «I have perseverance and intelligence», she wrote, «but no genius». Noble sees this as evidence of Somerville's absorption of the 'strange clerical culture' of science that by her time was 'a thousand years in the making' and whose prejudices she had internalised in 'mirrored female form'. He comments: «Her despair haunts us still» (1992, 281). The cost of such self-effacement is high.

Mary campaigned for women's rights and women's higher education but feared that the world of science would *remain* a world without women. Noble challenges the common assumption that the culture from which Western Science emerged *always* excluded women, highlighting earlier periods when women played a key role in scholarship, linking these to episodes of what he dubs 'anticlericalism'. Lalage's brief history of *Women's Scholarship Past and Future* endorses Noble's claims about the lost history of women's scholarship. She cautions against thinking that progress with respect to women's scholarship is linear: what has been won can be lost.

Lalage also points out that though the late nineteenth century was a watershed as far as women's access to university to acquire a degree is concerned, this was not the case in relation to their opportunity to *create* knowledge. They are still behind men in relation to the most prestigious subjects, in postgraduate study and top jobs in academia (Bown 1996).

Both Noble and Lalage point to earlier times when women had greater opportunities to develop new knowledge. In classical times, it was a woman, Hypatia (370-415 AD) who was one of the most notable scholars. As a mathematician, she

was a prototype for later successful women, many who excelled in Maths, which requires little apparatus and can be done in a domestic setting. Mary Somerville fits a pattern prefigured in antiquity, where access to knowledge depended on family circumstances, such as a father, husband, brother willing to share his knowledge. Later, between the seventh and eleventh centuries, Christian religious communities, sometimes headed by an abbess, offered opportunities for learning and scholarship, where women worked alongside men. These operated like small, endowed universities, such as when Hildegard of Bingen (1098-179) founded a convent and wrote medical texts.

By the end of the thirteenth century, the circumstances favouring the kind of establishment that allowed women like Hildegard to achieve intellectually had disappeared, victim to struggles between male secular and religious leaders and the centralising tendencies of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Scholarship passed from male *and* female monastic centres to exclusively male enclaves of episcopal schools of bishops. These became the universities, such as Oxford and Cambridge, where opportunity for study was restricted to a select few men. By the seventeenth century, in the wake of the Reformation and the humanist social movements arising out of it, new currents of learning flowed *outside* established institutions. These included many women - a temporary rapprochement between women and early modern science and intellectual culture that occurred «within the less formal circles of salon, court and craft» (Noble 1992, 197).

But by the close of the century, women were once again becoming identified as exaggeratedly sexual beings, intellectually inferior by nature, and marginalised to such an extent that some even waxed 'nostalgic for the convent'. In 1694, Mary Astell unsuccessfully petitioned the court to establish a Protestant female monastery where women could gain the education they were otherwise denied (Noble 1992, 243). The eighteenth-century Enlightenment made little difference in this regard, with universities, the Enlightenment's chief focus, remaining exclusively male well into the nineteenth century. Meanwhile, political control tightened guild regulations. Artisanal women were steadily replaced by men who, as scientifically trained professionals competing for their function, appropriated women's craft knowledge, most notably in medicine.

By the nineteenth century, there was an increase in women's participation in higher education, even if only informally (see below), but by the middle decades of the century, gender had become crucial once more for defining intellectual identities as well as social roles. Longstanding portrayals of women as incapable of creativity were recycled; and women who wrote explicitly to popularise science were represented as reliable *reproducers* rather than creators of knowledge. Mary Somerville and Harriet Martineau were both portrayed in this way, and, more perniciously, they saw themselves in these terms. The resulting psychological acrobatics could be profound. Martineau, a talented sociologist, journalist and political economist, initially presented herself as a diffuser of other peoples' knowledge. By the mid-1840s, having become involved in mesmerism, she said that the trance allowed her to solve profound philosophical issues – as if, as an entranced subject, she was able to claim authority and credibility from the very fact that she did not control her own mental state.

Who can count as an original thinker is of course not clear-cut. And for those who believe such cultural prejudices about women's lack of creativity are long gone, consider the example of a Professor of English at Glasgow University, whose introduction to the 1980 Penguin issue of Walter Scott's book, *Waverley*, opines:

> The novel gained a new authority and prestige, and, even more important perhaps, a new masculinity. After Scott, the novel was no longer in danger of becoming the preserve of the woman writer and the woman reader. Instead, it became the appropriate form for writers' richest and deepest imaginative explorations of human experience (quoted in Russell 1988, 296).

Women, it would seem, do not have 'human' experience; in this worldview, at best, women are allocated something akin to a position of permanent marginality.

When Enlightenment ideas were still in vogue in the late eighteenth century into the nineteenth, as alluded to above, there was a great deal of popular education, including higher education, for women, especially in Scotland, and not just for the daughters of exceptional nonconformist and intellectual families. For instance, at Anderson's Institute in Glasgow, between 1796 and 1850, large numbers of women and working men attended popular academic lectures in a range of subjects. Women in Scotland had significant access to university lectures at the time, though not as matriculated students.

By the later Victorian period such access was discouraged, and when women sought entry into the medical profession in the second half of the nineteenth-century, doctors told them that their «uteruses would atrophy and their brains would burst» (Smith 2000, 328). Thus, when in 1869 the first group of undergraduate female students to matriculate at any British university, the so-called 'Edinburgh Seven', began studying medicine at Edinburgh University, the Court of Session ruled that they should not have been admitted in the first place and could not graduate.

The reason is clear. By the middle of the nineteenth century women's education had come to be seen as a threat to male socio-economic dominance. The restructuring of universities and the professionalisation of many occupations raised the status of degrees and made *graduation* of increasing socioeconomic value to men. As higher education became increasingly important for men it became more inaccessible for women.

Lalage's short history, like Noble's longer one, charts a recurrence of counter-progressive trends, as when, between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, the increasing centralisation of learned establishments like monasteries into new universities led to the exclusion of women, and when, in the sixteenth century, women barber-surgeons were forced out of their occupation when universities took over the accreditation and licensing of physicians. Lalage frames her history differently from Noble's 'clerical' versus 'anti-clerical' periods. She concludes: «Centralization and rationalization seem to be inimical to women's scholarship since they are used to assert male dominance. Where structures were less formal women were able to establish their own» (Bown 1996, 179).

Parallel arguments can be made about Adult Education itself; namely, that it is the marginal, non-mainstream position of Adult Education which has been its particular strength and which, in its more radical forms, has enabled social movements and community groups to secure the services of intellectuals for their own ends and projects (Steele 2007). Adult Education has an important history in relation to social movements. Yet just as women's historical struggles for education and equality have to be continually rescued from our forgotten memory (along with individual women's intellectual achievements) so too Adult Education's traditions of engagement with groups and social movements are readily forgotten. An example is Women's Education/Women's Studies as it developed in the 1970s out of the Women's Liberation Movement, a seedbed of study groups, newsletters, conferences and consciousness-raising.

Unlike in the USA, where the strongest women's studies networks developed in higher education, in Britain, women's studies grew up and acquired its distinctive methods in Adult Education, the least well-resourced, most marginal sector of education and the only sector where most participants, both students and tutors, were women. Before the sweeping changes of recent decades, Adult Education seemed to many feminists a fruitful place to carry out the educational work inspired by the Women's Liberation Movement. It had many of the features of a popular education movement, much of it taking place in local areas and promoting links between local groups, women's health, trades union and peace movements, as well as with the wider women's movement. Little of this feminist inspired women's education in the 1970s and 1980s was documented, precisely *because* it took place in the poorly resourced Adult Education sector of the Workers Educational Association (WEA), Local Authority Community Education and University Extra-mural Departments, whose part-time tutors had neither the time nor resources to write about it.

Redefining the content of education and what *counts* as knowledge was a key objective of such women's education/women's studies from the outset. As part of a wider struggle to empower women, it aimed to show that knowledge and education are related in fundamental ways to the unequal distribution of social power between men and women. For this reason, it was concerned as much with context, timetabling and crèches as with content and pedagogy. By seeking to bring education «nearer to a point of full *human* relevance and control» it satisfied Raymond Williams' litmus test of 'cultural seriousness' as spelled out in "*Culture is Ordinary*" (Williams 1993; italics added). Scottish education traditions, despite their reputation for being (or having been) uniquely egalitarian and democratic, fail this test.

I encountered David Noble's (secular) male clerisy alive and kicking in Scotland's educational establishment when I embarked on writing a book on Scotland's so-called 'democratic intellect', made famous by George Davie in his text of that title. When Lalage set out to chart women's progress in relation to women's scholarship, noting that «Academic curricula are male constructs and females are still largely defined out», she did so with specific reference to Davie, noting in characteristically direct manner that «All books on the democratic intellect do this; all» (Bown 1996, 182). Davie's book and the vast literature spawned in

its wake are almost totally silent on women. Yet in 2003 it was still being hailed as the «single most important volume written in the twentieth century about Scottish intellectual history» (Turnbull 2003). The 'democratic intellect' is part of a Scottish national narrative that is deeply gendered and resistant to change.

The Democratic Intellect (Davie 1961) is in fact a kind of lament for Scotland's lost, native, intellectual tradition as enshrined in its universities. The legacy of the eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment, it contends, combined with the country's distinctive Presbyterian culture, was a bent towards a peculiarly critical intelligence, with theory or philosophy at its core. This dominated Scotland's universities until the late nineteenth century when, says Davie, it was suppressed by a process of Anglicisation. In Davie's view, «the Scots» had «an almost religious attachment» to the «inherited ideal of a culture in which the general should take precedence over the particular and the whole over the parts» (Davie 1961, 4). Really?

The kind of intellectual history practised by George Davie and many others is challenged by historian Eileen Yeo, who construes it as consisting of «depicting the discussions and quarrels among formally educated men» (Yeo 1996, 11). A typical sentence in Davie's book begins, «Ferrier, Forbes and Blackie had in fact more in common with older men like Hamilton, Brewster and Melvin [...] than with younger men like Lyon Playfair and Principal Shairp and Edward Caird whose views [...]» (Davie 1961, 277; Barr 2008). Yeo challenges this sort of history for its restrictive notion of knowledge:

> If scholars do not seek subaltern groups, they do not find them. Without a more spacious idea of context which makes room for less privileged persons, scholars will go on constructing models of [...] the production of knowledge which allow no room for activity from below in the past or in the future (Yeo 1996, XI).

Yeo's *The Contest for Social Science* offers a case study to demonstrate how the 'production of knowledge' was a battleground in Britain in the early-to-mid-nineteenth century. The participants in this struggle were not a handful of university men and bureaucrats but groups and social movements, as well as individuals. Most notably perhaps, the Co-operative and socialist movement, inspired by Robert Owen, but with an overwhelmingly working-class membership, challenged all 'education from above', urging working people to 'think for themselves', and stressing mutual improvement. Owenism was the first really influential movement also to address gender inequality and cultural oppression. Founded at New Lanark in the 1820s, it even called its strategies 'social science', where experience, importantly, women's experience, had a key place, opening a way to accessible forms of social knowledge and to what Logie Barrow has called a 'democratic epistemology' (Barrow 1986; Yeo 1996, 25).

Yeo highlights the role of adult learning in 'liberating knowledge'. Her account of the emergence of Social Science as a field of study tells a story of a massive takeover bid by professional men and women *from* working people who had developed their own ideas and knowledge for emancipation, so as to establish their *professional* indispensability. Davie's account of the democratic intellect

slots neatly into this kind of intellectual history, totally ignoring independent sources of knowledge outside the universities and at the same time guaranteeing his own place as guardian of Scotland's national culture. This type of enquiry produces some peculiar blind spots. The absence of women is simply *not noticed*.

Throughout the 1980s I was District Secretary of the West of Scotland District of the Workers Educational Association (WEA). When I began working for the WEA Margaret Thatcher's policies were beginning to bite. For the rest of the decade, the WEA in Scotland was subject to short-term funding, frozen Scottish Education Department grants and cutbacks in Local Authority spending. Lack of resources went hand in hand with the absence of any coherent policy on adult and continuing education in Scotland and any sensible framework for its delivery. But up the road was a fellow spirit and staunch ally. To my great good fortune Lalage Bown moved to Glasgow in 1981 to begin her decade as Head of the Department of Adult and Continuing Education (DACE) at the University of Glasgow. Since 1949 she had lived mainly in Africa, spending much of her career developing Adult Education provision in Ghana, Uganda, Zambia and Nigeria, with a particular commitment to women's empowerment through literacy.

We spent the 1980s fighting the same battles, from the same corner. One of these shared enterprises concerned women's education. For much of this period, only two WEA District Secretaries in the UK were women (out of a total of twenty-one) and both were in Scotland, the most poorly resourced part of the WEA. My District had an established tradition of women's education stretching back to Jean McCrindle's groundbreaking work with the Cooperative Movement in the 1960s and her pioneering 'women's studies' afternoon classes for working class women in Lanarkshire. The classes even provided childcare - an aspect of WEA provision that would become enshrined only much later (though briefly) in WEA national policy. From the mid-1970s into the 1980s, women's courses were again mounted, this time in so-called Areas for Priority Treatment (APTs), using money from Strathclyde Regional Council, in line with the Region's area-based, 'community development' social deprivation strategy.

Lalage and I shared an antipathy to what she described as the «target-group mentality», which could attach to Strathclyde's approach. Quoting Ettore Gelpi, she insisted:

> Adult education is [...] about enabling people to become subjects, rather than objects and when we work in co-operation with disadvantaged groups, the enterprise needs to be on that basis – co-operation and not on a basis of doing things to people (Bown 1986, 36).

But in the 1980s, Adult Education, as incorporated within the community development strategy of Strathclyde Region, often failed to take seriously the *educational* needs of the people involved, usually women. Frequently slipped by stealth into community centres and mothers-and-toddlers' groups almost apologetically, its informality and near invisibility could be a cloak for a hidden curriculum (concerning mothering skills), never surfacing sufficiently to be subject to negotiation or challenge.

The Women's Education/Women's Studies courses that were developed in Strathclyde's APTs by the WEA and extramural departments were the antithesis of such 'education for the disadvantaged', which, by definition, sold people short. Developed by tutors who were part of the women's movement in the West of Scotland, courses drew on their own experiences of campaigning and workshop-based conferences, which played such a major part in feminists' lives at the time. Groups focused on themes like the family, welfare, employment, sex and gender; curricula developed out of the women's own lives, making connections with literature, the law, social and historical studies, as and when required.

Some of these discussion groups, which met in community centres, nursery schools and unemployed workers centres, developed into drama or writing/reading groups; others became stepping-stones into various forms of education or community and political action. An important feature of provision was the coming together of women from different areas at 'awaydays' and residential weekends held at Newbattle Abbey College, with crèche provided. But by the mid-1980s, the social change, coupled with personal development aspects of the work, had given way to personal development goals. There was a growth in assertiveness-training and in health and counselling courses, reflecting a growing trend towards finding personal solutions to social problems and a waning of belief in politics and social movements as forces for change.

Feminism itself fragmented, with Thatcherism effectively forcing the most political forms of British feminism, particularly socialist feminism, underground. By the mid-1990s, tensions had developed between Women's Studies (explicitly feminist with its distinctive subject areas and methodologies) and Women's Education, masking the latter's feminist antecedents and increasingly concentrating on assertiveness training, New Opportunities and vocational preparation courses. Women's Studies as a field of academic study had by then become fairly well entrenched in universities, with tenuous, if any, links with grassroots feminist politics. The two strands, which had co-existed in Adult Education, providing feminist scholarship with a dynamic intellectual community, united around an educational/political project, defined as much by pressures 'from below' as educational priorities 'from above', separated.

There are now several women's movements across the world with diverse aims and degrees of power. Ignored by the media (except the recent 'Me Too' movement), these movements have mobilized well beyond the women's liberation groups of the 1970s, to create new national and international networks. Many women, particularly the poorest amongst them, in Mexico, Peru, Nicaragua and South Africa, faced with extreme circumstances, such as displacement through war and famine and the dominance of market forces, have organised around prices, basic social needs, education and sanitation. Recent events in Afghanistan around the exclusion of girls from secondary schools show just how rapidly gains that are made by women can be lost, whilst in Iran, for the first time, it is a women's movement that is leading anti-regime protests.

There, thousands of women and schoolgirls have taken to the streets, following the death in custody of Mahsa Amini, arrested by morality police for improper wearing of the hijab. Protests against religious rule have spread as never

before, ignited by a new generation of highly educated women and girls, outraged at being told how to behave, whose parents and grandparents had tried and failed to change the system from within. «Clerics, get lost» is the chant of girls as young as eleven across Iran. Small acts of defiance such as discarded headscarves and shorn hair have become part of daily life in Tehran, and despite further murders, crowds continue to gather, chanting, «No force. No hijab. Freedom and Equality!» Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe's public hair-cutting act of solidarity in London was designed to show that the fight for women's rights in Iran is a global fight. Meanwhile, in the US, the Supreme Court's reversal of the Roe versus Wade ruling on abortion is a useful reminder that it is not just in religious autocracies that women's hard-won rights can be erased.

Where is Adult Education in all of this?

Here, in the UK, Adult Education has gone in and out of receiving government attention in recent decades, usually as a means of promoting flexibility and transferable skills in a rapidly changing world. Yet as the kind of women's education described earlier that Lalage championed indicates, Adult Education can be a means by which people deal creatively and critically with the world in order to change it. The forgetting of such traditions has gone hand in glove with Adult Education's overhaul in favour of instrumental values and business interests. As Lalage once remarked, in relation to the commodification of knowledge, «Information is to knowledge as a pile of bricks is to a skyscraper» (Bown 2004). For university extra mural education, the result of this narrowing of horizons and winnowing of the curriculum has been either its complete abandonment or absorption into the mainstream. This is a great loss. To borrow an expression from the late, great, bell hooks, Adult Education, with all its limitations, remains a «location of possibility» where «we [can] collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom» (hooks 1994).

Such an idea of education contrasts with «the great British social mobility myth» inscribed in our education system which Selina Todd has recently taken to task. As a promise of a better society, social mobility has failed. Policies meant to encourage the talented to ascend have not resulted in a meritocratic ladder:

> Instead, twenty-first-century Britain is more akin to the 'greasy pole', criticised by the Workers' Educational Association in the 1900s. At the top sits a tiny group of wealthy and powerful people, who have spent the last few decades stripping the world of its resources [...]. Far below is everyone else, clinging tight [...] but all too often sliding further down (Todd 2021, 353).

Todd believes that the time has come to rediscover the campaigns of 1970s feminists. Since the status quo has rarely benefited women, it is frequently women who have had to be the most imaginative in their visions of a better society. In the middle of the twentieth century, feminists like Ellen Wilkinson, as Minister for Education, created and helped implement transformative social policies. In 1945, she and other architects of the welfare state didn't know if their poli-

cies would succeed. We now know that they did (however briefly) and that they created a society that was more equal and didn't lead to the economic disaster so many predicted but, on the contrary, to improvements in everyone's living standards. In 1940, few people would have dreamed that they would have free healthcare, secondary schools for all, university grants and a political commitment to full employment within a decade.

Fast forward eighty years and Britain is now one of the most unequal countries in Europe. OECD data show that the UK, where social mobility has been slowing down for the past forty years, now has one of the lowest levels of social mobility in the developed world. If Labour could erect an unprecedentedly ambitious welfare state at the end of a crippling world war, then the fifth-richest nation of the early twenty-first century can surely initiate reforms that will show – as did the labour movement pioneers of the early twentieth century and the leftists and feminists of the 1970s – that an unequal hierarchy of wealth and power is only one model for organising society, one that fails the vast majority of people.

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