

Mary Burton, educational and social reformer (1819-1909)

Who was this woman that was once described by one of her contemporaries as "a unique example of the Victorian woman on the warpath"? Mary Burton is certainly one of the great unknowns in the education sector in Edinburgh and very few people will have heard of her, not to mention those people employed by the institution today for which she worked tirelessly over hundred years ago.

Born in Aberdeen, she spent most of her life in Edinburgh where she made "trail-blazing inroads into public life" on behalf of women. Unmarried but looking after and providing for a large extended family (a fate shared by Scottish writer Margaret Oliphant at about the same time) and which included a young Arthur Conan Doyle, she fought for women's access to higher education and greater representation in public life.

She played a crucial role in the governance of the Watt Institution and the School of Arts (based in Chambers Street), the forerunner of Heriot-Watt University (now at Riccarton). It Mary Burton was one of the subscribers to the Institute (money was always tight) and was later elected to the Board of Directors.

In 1866 the Watt Institution allowed women to attend classes alongside men, 20 years ahead of other universities, thanks to Mary Burton's efforts. Her niece Ella Burton was one of the first women to take advantage of this new opportunity. However, it was only towards the end of the 1880s (due to the Universities Scotland Act of 1889) that Universities were empowered to "admit women to graduation". Mary Burton believed in access for all and lifelong learning and fought adamantly for co-education, even making a case for evening classes for both sexes and teaching boys to sew and knit.

The 1860s were a fertile time in Edinburgh with more and more women attempting to remove the barriers excluding women from public life. Mary Burton also supported the cause of women's suffrage and in 1868 took part in a campaign to challenge the exclusion of women from the electorate. Although she did not manage to be put on the electoral register, she was "the only one who dared to plead 'her case personally in court'". She also sat on various boards (Edinburgh Parish Council, Edinburgh School Board) and bought up slum tenements in Edinburgh in order to reform her tenants "by elevating them 'in cleanliness, thrift and sobriety'".

Mary Burton was widely interested and took an active part in the Watt Institution's Literary Society (whose Honorary President she was from 1883 to 1901), engaging in debates well up into her 70s and 80s, representing for or against the motion. Her niece was also an active member in the 1870s. Debates ranged from literary subjects to religion and spirituality, the *hot* topic all over Europe in the second half of the 19th c. to education, politics and economy ("should British railroads be nationalised?").

In her will she left "£100 to provide prizes for 'deserving students irrespective of age or sex' attending evening classes at Heriot-Watt College and £100 to the Edinburgh Women's Suffrage Society to campaign 'for the admission of women to sit as members of parliament, either at Westminster or in a Scottish Parliament'".

Mary Burton died in Aberdeen and is buried in the Dean Cemetery in Edinburgh.

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