



The history of Georgina Kinnear

The education of girls in the nineteenth century could be a haphazard affair. The frustration felt by intelligent girls at the huge gap between their learning and that of their brothers is a well-known theme of Victorian novels and biographies of Victorian women. But in the second half of the century more and more voices were raised in the demand for equality of opportunity in education for women, and the movement to admit women to universities – and allow them to graduate – and to prepare them for higher education by sound and serious schooling, steadily gathered momentum.

The family of eight-year old Georgina Kinnear had moved to Glasgow from Edinburgh in 1834. Georgina was an exceptional child, who formed the habit at an early age of getting up each morning at five o'clock to read, well wrapped in a shawl, in the attic of her family's house in Clarence Place, near the Sauchie Haugh as it was then. She never went to school and gained her education in languages from her brothers' tutors, and in other subjects largely by her own efforts. In 1880 Georgina Kinnear was appointed first headmistress of Glasgow's newly established Park School. It is thanks not only to her, but to the gentlemen Directors of the Girls' School Company who appointed her, and to those who were a few years later responsible for the opening of a sister school in Kilmacolm (St Columba's), that many fortunate young Scottish girls of those days received an education not inferior to that of their brothers.

The Girls' School Company was formed in 1879 by a group of Glasgow businessmen, professional men and academics, with the object of founding a school or schools for girls where they could receive a sound and liberal education.

Georgina Kinnear had a significant influence on the early days of St Columba's School, in particular because, when she was consulted about the appointment of its Headmistress, she nominated Miss Young, who had been at the Park School first as her pupil, and then as a member of her staff. When Miss Kinnear retired from Park, Miss Young succeeded her, and another teacher nurtured by Georgina Kinnear, Miss Waugh, took over at St Columba's. In the early cross-fertilisation between the Park School and St Columba's, Miss Kinnear's influence was very great.

Georgina Kinnear was a most remarkable woman. The second half of her life was devoted to the education of girls in Scotland, in which she was one of the little group of women pioneers. In her early days she had travelled Europe, spending some years in Russia where she was tutor to the children of a would-be reforming Minister of Tsar Alexander II. On her return to her own country she spent a couple of years teaching at Cheltenham Ladies'

College under the famous Dorothea Beale. She was then asked in 1877, to be one of the four original teachers at St Leonards School, St Andrews, under Miss (later Dame) Louisa Lumsden.

Miss Kinnear made a deep impression upon all who worked with her or studied under her. She was a woman of great learning and true scholarship, but it was the originality of her mind that marked her out as extraordinary. A Liberal and a reformer by political inclination, she was something of a radical in her educational thinking even among the company of these early champions of women's education. Her own teaching was over the heads of some of her pupils, but she was fond of telling them: "You are not here to learn, but to learn how to learn." All forms of pettiness, small-mindedness and complacency were completely foreign to Miss Kinnear. A pupil of hers, Margot Wells, recalled that:

Her sudden and startling 'Whys' would set our dull minds groping for a reason for actions hitherto taken as a matter of course. Her constant battle cry 'Think for yourselves' had its effect deeper and more far reaching than any mere drilling of facts into reluctant small minds.

The information above was drawn from excerpts from Variety without Disorder A History of St Columba's 1897-1997 written by Susan Milligan as well as other documents kindly supplied by St Leonards School, where Georgina Kinnear was a founding teacher.

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