Women during the Early Years of the Newcastle Lit and Phil

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SUMMARY

In his standard history of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle upon Tyne, Robert Spence Watson (1897, 45) states that at its beginning 'There was no provision made for women members […]' and when he recounts the introduction of a new class of Reading Members he comments 'So far as I have been able to ascertain, ours was the first English Society which opened its doors to women' (1897, 57). It comes as no surprise to learn from a more detailed investigation that the real situation was not so simple: while the majority of the Society appears to have been generally in favour of the admission of women, there is evidence of a small but influential group that was adamantly opposed to it. Although it has been possible to identify the handful of members who were particularly active in promoting the rights of women, in particular members of the small sect of Unitarian Baptists, their opponents have remained anonymous, and little more is known about the women members themselves.

EARLY PATTERNS OF MEMBERSHIP

There have been detailed accounts of the beginnings of the *Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle upon Tyne* (Watson 1897; Harbottle 1997) however not all of the surviving evidence about the development of its membership, especially in the minutes of the Monthly Meetings,[1] has been considered, although some of it is noted in a little-known account (Clephan 1859). All authors comment on the founding committee in February 1793, which, as might be expected, consisted of well-educated and prosperous Newcastle citizens: medical men in particular, along with two architects, a judge, and so on. The original membership has a similar social structure: of 73 members, 14 are gentlemen, identified by the title 'Sir' or 'esq', although there are many more men of property, such as George and William Losh, who are simply listed as 'Mr'; 11 are either Doctors of Medicine or are known to have been surgeons; six are clergymen, identified by the title 'Rev', including William Turner and Edward Moises. A further 45 joined in the first year, recommended by the existing members, including five medics and two clergymen.[2]

Originally the principal object of the Society was the exchange of intelligence at Monthly Meetings, and its main expense would have been the rent and maintenance of suitable premises, but, following the decision in 1794 to collect a library, the purchase of books became significant, and was a major concern of the Committee even into the twenty-first century. Undoubtedly many, perhaps most, people joined the society to access books that would have been unobtainable otherwise, and maintaining the balance between income from membership and expenditure on books is a recurring theme in the early Committee minutes. No accounts survive from the time of Thomas Gibson, the first treasurer (Mackenzie 1827, 482), but in August of his first year in the post, 1798, the new treasurer, William Boyd, reported that

subscriptions were in arrears by £153, and the members were informed that no further books could be purchased until the Society had a sufficient surplus in its funds. Finances might have been unusually stretched that year since the Society had just moved into new premises at the Old Assembly Rooms, but similar difficulties occurred in subsequent years.

The rules of the Society required that candidates for membership had to be proposed by three existing members at a Monthly Meeting, and elected at the one following. Apart from a couple of months in the first year, the minutes of these meetings do not record much about this procedure. Often candidates are recorded as 'duly proposed', but more new members are listed in the annual reports than appear in the monthly minutes, and a relaxed approach seems to have been taken until the end of 1797.

Once the names of proposers begin to appear in the minute books, more detailed evidence of social networks within the Society becomes available. Unsurprisingly the names of committee members occur most often, with William Turner, the senior secretary and driving force of the Society, being the most frequent (156 out of 301 members proposed by the time of the Anniversary Meeting in March 1804), followed a long way behind by John Brummell, who was the junior secretary from 1796 (49 proposals). One notable exception is John Clennell, who, although he was never a member of the committee, proposed 47 new members. Curiously he is the only member to appear for the first time in the list for 1798 whose election is not recorded in the minutes of the Monthly Meetings, and he seems to have been a member from some time in 1797. His activities in the Society are not limited to proposing new members: he presented seven papers at eleven Monthly Meetings between October 1797 and 1808, when he moved to London, and his name appears more often than any other in the Society's first Recommendation Book (1794–1801).

Between February and April 1798 Clennell proposed 17 new members. In February the other proposers were Dr John Ramsay and Dr George Grieve, with Dr Grieve replaced by William Turner in March and April. Dr Ramsay was one of the original committee members, and at that time President of the Newcastle Philosophical and Medical Society (Watson 1897, 42). Dr Grieve began life as a Presbyterian minister but became a Baptist and took up medicine (Mackenzie 1827, 516). A few months later, presumably in response to the financial concerns, several new members that were distinctly more affluent were persuaded to join: between July and November the 20 members proposed included Sir Charles Monck, one doctor, seven esqs, and individuals from well-known local families. Clennell proposed only two members, and one of them can be identified as a linen-draper.

UNITARIAN BAPTISTS

A small group of Baptists adopted Unitarian views and separated from their congregation on the Tuthill Stairs *c.* 1775. In 1789 William Robson took a prominent part in the building of a chapel (Ditchfield 2007, 2, 38), along with his father-in-law, Caleb Alder. His eldest child, Caleb, is listed as a member of the Lit & Phil in 1793, and Mackenzie (1827, 379) mentions four of his daughters: Priscilla, married to Samuel Clegg, engineer, of Manchester; Ann, married to John Clennell; Elizabeth, married to Thomas Holland of Manchester, brother-in-law of William Turner; and Mary who married Mr. Hughes [Hughs] of Dundee, and published several school books. William Robson was proposed as a member of the Lit & Phil on 8 October 1799 by John Clennell, William Turner and Rev Edward Prowitt, who had been the minister of the Unitarian Baptists until they merged with the Hanover Square congregation

in 1797, when he became Turner's assistant. Like Turner and other non-conformist ministers, he ran a school. He himself was a founder member of the Lit & Phil.

Mackenzie's account (1827, 379–380) includes a brief biography of John Clennell and he comments that 'his habits were so unbusiness-like, that loss and disappointment attended all his movements [between enterprises]. […] His thirst for knowledge was very great, not less his desire of its diffusion for the general good.' His papers that were read at the Monthly Meetings cover a wide range of topics, most notably on the disclosure of trade secrets of manufacturing (later published), and on Persian literature. He was made a Fellow of the Society of Arts of Edinburgh and Perth on account of his contributions to that subject. After he moved to London to open a school he was the driving force behind the formation of the (short-lived) Literary and Philosophical Society of Hackney in 1811, which he ensured admitted women from its foundation.

Although these members of the small community of Unitarian Baptists hardly appear in any of the standard histories, if at all, they were to have a disproportionate influence on many aspects of the Lit & Phil during its first quarter century. At the Anniversary Meeting in March 1797, for example, a new class of membership, 'honorary with privileges', was established to allow people who could not afford the subscription of 1 guinea per year access to the Society. It was limited to a maximum of four people. There is no record of who proposed either the innovation or the first such member, A. Smith of Gateshead. On 11 December 1798 Robert Hall of Winlaton, who appears as a parent in the Unitarian Baptist register,[3] was proposed by William Turner, John Clennell and Edward Prowitt. William Robson was proposed on 13 March 1799 by Clennell, William Hind and Turner, but the proposal was withdrawn by Clennell, and he later became an ordinary member as mentioned above. On 9 July 1799 John Marshall, another parent in the Unitarian Baptist register, was proposed by Prowitt, Turner and Clennell. A few months later he was to become the Society's librarian.

WOMEN

Feminist Books

At the end of the eighteenth century there was a lot of debate about the education of young women. Many books on the subject were requested in the Recommendations Book, and still survive in the Society's library. For example, Erasmus Darwin's *Plan for the Conduct of Female Education in Boarding Schools* was recommended in July 1797 by William Crawford and again by George Gray (Thomas Bewick's friend). William Crawford's name appears in the book almost as often as John Clennell's, and they frequently support each other's entries. The committee agreed to order the book on 21 March 1798.

At the same period there were works of a more radical feminist nature, most famously those by Mary Wollstonecraft. Her *Vindication of the Rights of Women* and *Tour in Norway, Sweden and Denmark* were recommended in the same entry, which unusually is unsigned; a year or two later the committee ruled that unsigned entries would be ignored. They were ordered on 17 January 1797. Godwin's *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft* was recommended by John Rayne, countersigned by John Clennell and William Boyd (the treasurer), and ordered on 20 February 1798. John Rayne's name appears occasionally in the Society's records, most notably as one of James Losh's proposers. Losh, a Unitarian, became Recorder of Newcastle after the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, and is associated particularly with the anti-slavery movement. His statue is a prominent feature on the main staircase up to the library.

One of John Clennell's lists of recommendations includes the note 'For the *Appeal to Men in Behalf of Women* [by Mary Hays] see *Analytical Review* for July last [1798] p. 23'. The committee's response states that it is 'in Sand's Library and of no great merit'. It seems that Clennell bought it himself because he donated a copy to the library in 1801.

The Admission of Women

Eight pages after this Clennell, countersigned by William Crawford, asks:

In the meeting of the Society in December [1798] it was suggested that ladies were to be admitted – on paying a subscription — the time not being laid — on what terms are they to be admitted? — & when?

The committee's response states the technical position, and provides a clue to what might have been discussed at the meeting:

Ladies are & always have been admissible as members, by the way set down in the Rules of the Society; what was suggested, was, whether some mode less revolting to their delicacy could not be adopted; but as that required an alteration of or addition to the Rules, it was necessarily defer'd till the anniversary meeting in March.

It is possible that the admission of women was considered as a way of increasing membership, and hence income from subscriptions. It is not immediately obvious what might be so objectionable about the usual procedure:

All candidates for admission shall be proposed at a regular meeting by at least three members, and balloted for at the succeeding meeting. At every election twelve Members at least shall be present; and the votes of three-fourths of the Members present shall be requisite for the admission of the candidate.

A change of rules needed only a simple majority, and the Anniversary Meeting of 13 March 1799 resolved:

That a new Class of membership be instituted under the denomination of reading members who shall voluntarily relinquish the privilege of attending the general meetings and voting in the choice of officers & that ladies be eligible into this Class; the Society waiving in their case the months previous proposal.

The only difference from the usual procedure that is explicit is the removal of the need for a month between the proposal of ladies and the ballot. The next (1801) and subsequent printings of the Rules of the Society make no mention of Reading Members. Clennell suggested:

The Question regarding the Introduction of Ladies into the Society as a distinct class having been carried by a Majority at the annual meeting the following query is submitted to the committee — whether would it be prudent or otherwise to mention it, either as an advertisement or an article of intelligence in the News Papers of this Town, not so much for the sake of proclaiming the Lit & Phil Society of Newcastle as being the first to admit Ladies into its circle (tho' even that might afford a reason) as to suggest a hint to other Societies of the same Nature with this to offer them the same privilege — as an article of Intelligence it may possibly be copied into various magazines & circulated thro' their medium; inserting it in the Newspapers will also make it more publicly known in this Town.

The response reads 'The committee does not think any information on this subject necessary'.

Clearly the matter was controversial, and the next entry in the Recommendations Book is by Henry Mewburn (a surgeon); 'Is the life of the late Mary Wollstonecraft or the posthumous works of that person proper Publications, to be contained in the Literary Society. The Committee are requested to Investigate that Business'. The concern was possibly the inflammatory consequences of allowing women access to the works of Wollstonecraft. The response was, 'The Committee does not conceive it to be a work prohibited by the Rules: and decline giving any more particular opinion of their own on its merits'. Something similar had happened a few years earlier in 1796 when William Rayne and Robert Doubleday (a vice-president) had asked a similar question about works of religious controversy, and the committee had ordered books to be removed (Watson 1897, 177).

There are signs of arguments about procedures for the admission of members throughout 1799. At the monthly meeting on 9 April Mr Kentish (a vice-president and a surgeon) 'gave notice that he should at the anniversary meeting make a motion that in balloting a majority of Balls in favour of admission shall entitle a person proposed to become a Member of the Society'. At the same meeting it was ordered: 'That the ballot for members be made & conducted at the small table & that a member of the Committee attend at every Ballot'.

The minutes for the May meeting record that Mr Doubleday was in the chair and 'Mr Widdrington & Miss Deer were elected to the possession of the privilege of using the library'. Only Miss Deer appears as a reading member in the list of members published in 1801, but the new procedure had been specific to ladies, so the reason for Mr Widdrington's inclusion is not clear. There was a last-ditch attempt to prevent the admission of Miss Deer at the following monthly meeting on 11 June, Mr Doubleday in the chair:

> Whereas the proceedings relative to the election of Members at the Past meeting have been thought to be irregular, because no President or Vice President was in the Chair usually occupied by such officers at the public meetings of the society,
>
> "Resolved
>
> That in future no elections of members shall take place, until the Society shall have been regularly constituted by having a Chairman in his usual and proper place."

This seems to relate to the order at the April meeting, but its status as a change of rule was unclear, and notice was given at the November meeting of changes to be proposed at the next Anniversary Meeting:

> Mr Doubleday gave notice that he would at the anniversary Meeting submit a motion that the general Monthly Meeting should from time to time have power to alter the Regulations & Laws of the Society.
>
> Mr Sorsbie [either Malin, a committee member, or his son, Benjamin] gave notice that he should at the same Meeting propose that it should be competent to the Monthly Meetings to dispense with any Law or Laws in particular Cases.

All of the proposals were withdrawn when the Anniversary Meeting eventually came around.

The difficulty with the usual procedure becomes clear when account is taken of some proposals on 14 July 1801. Mrs Anna Laetitia Barbauld of London was proposed as an Honorary Member by J. Clennell, W. Robson, W. Boyd, E.Bruce, Isaac Richardson and Lewis

Legge, and Miss Mary Hayes [Hays] of London by J. Clennell, E. Bruce, Lewis Legge, J. Bruce, Jos. Bulmer and W. Robson. Three proposers would have been enough, but having twice that number emphasised the level of support that existed. We have already met Clennell, Robson and Boyd. Lewis Legge was one of the people proposed by Clennell in 1799, and seems to have been part of a network that included William Hind, John Rayne and William Crawford. Edward and John Bruce were brothers and teachers, John (father of John Collingwood Bruce) becoming especially celebrated (Welford 1895, 1, 408–415). Isaac Richardson was a Quaker tanner (Lovell 1992, 12), and Joseph Bulmer appears in local directories as a builder. It is rather surprising that William Turner's name does not appear, since he knew Mrs Barbauld when he was a child, and wrote her obituary in The Newcastle Magazine (April and May 1825). These were the first ever proposals of women that followed the usual procedure, and even though they were for Honorary Membership since they lived so far away, and would probably never be able to attend, the process might have been too controversial for Turner to support or perhaps he was simply not present. The ladies were not elected the following month.

The significance of the month's gap between proposal and election might have been that it gave time for members who were against the admission of women to organise themselves to secure the necessary 25% of the vote needed to prevent their election, making this mode 'revolting to their delicacy'. Another factor might have been that if they were not elected as Reading Members there would be no record in the minutes, as there would have been the previous month in the usual procedure.

The next women to appear in the record were two Reading Members proposed on 7 June 1803 by William Turner, William Robson and Benjamin Sorsbie, and elected. It might simply be a coincidence but the following month William Temple was proposed by John Murray (surgeon), Turner and Boyd. That would be unremarkable since all the proposers were on the committee, except that Temple, master of All Saint's poor house, is described by Mackenzie (1827, 543) as 'a singular character […] He was a rigid Presbyterian, — never lost sight of the immense inferiority of women to the "lords of the creation," and strongly supported St. Paul's advice for "every man to bear rule in his own house"'. Perhaps the opposition was losing ground and was enlisting more support.

The Annual Reports for 1803, 1804 and 1805 do not list any new Reading Members, so presumably Mrs Wilson and Mrs Smith did not last the year. There are four recorded for the period between March 1805, and March 1806: Mrs Alcock, Miss Jack, Mrs Prowitt [presumably Edward Prowitt's widow, who continued to run the school] and Miss Rogerson. The last three were proposed on 4 June by William Turner, John and Edward Bruce, but the minutes for 7 January 1806 do not record who proposed Mrs Alcock, and minutes of subsequent elections to the class of reading members do not record the proposers. John Bruce had taught in Mrs Wilson's school, and in 1804 married Mary Jack, who also taught at Mrs Wilson's school (Welford 1895, 1, 410) and was presumably Miss Jack's sister.

Only one new Reading Member was admitted in 1806, followed by four in 1807 which evidently reflected the end of opposition because the Annual Report for 1808 reports:

> Your committee beg leave also to announce, that the number of that class of Members, which was instituted with a particular view to the admission of Ladies to the privileges of the Library, has this year considerably increased; and they believe they may safely appeal to the experience of every individual Member, whether any inconvenience has arisen from such increase. Your Committee therefore hope that the objections which have hitherto been made to the institution of this class will not be any longer insisted upon.

This is the only admission that there had ever been any objections, and it is a pity that more details were not recorded.

THE NEW INSTITUTION

The involved history of the New Institution has been described in detail (Harbottle 1997, 67–83), especially the controversy in 1808, referred to later, but its relevance to women in the Society has been largely ignored. After Thomas Bigge's proposal to establish a lectureship at the Monthly Meeting in June 1802, William Turner delivered an introduction to the intended plan of the New Institution a few months later in November. Most of the argument is about the relevance of a knowledge of science to businessmen and its importance for young men embarking on a career, but he also comments on its importance for:

> that sex, which, by its liberal encouragement of such designs, whether on a limited or more extensive scale, evinces, on all occasions, its native and disinterested love of knowledge, and shews a highly honourable disposition to share in more rational sources of entertainment than those held forth by the votaries of fashionable dissipation.

He relates drawing, music and domestic economy to science, and goes on to ask; 'Is it not from our parents of this sex that we obtain our earliest and most valuable knowledge?'. He then develops the usual argument about the importance of mothers in the education of children. He refers specifically to *Practical Education* by the Edgeworths (recommended by Clennell in the same list as Hays's *Appeal to Me*n, and eventually acquired by the library, although it does not appear in the 1801 catalogue). From the beginning females were allowed to attend Turner's lectures. There was a complicated structure of prices, but a woman's ticket was half the price of a man's, and tickets at the special members' rates could be transferred to any of their family.

THE WIDER SIGNIFICANCE

From its beginnings the Lit & Phil had been constituted to avoid discussion of contentious issues distracting from the free interchange of information, and, following the rules of the Manchester Lit & Phil, on which it was modelled, any discussion of religion or the politics of the day was forbidden. The status of women was equally controversial (the Manchester society did not admit them until the twentieth century), and was an aspect of both religious and political opinion, which was the force of Mr Mewburn's question, but the committee felt that it was a legitimate topic for the Society. In this (as in other matters) the Unitarian Baptists were radical progressives. They were a small group of individuals who had left the denomination of their birth, embraced a philosophy widely (and legally) considered to be heretical, organized themselves, and raised the wherewithal to found a chapel. In some ways they prefigure Primitive Methodists, whose organizational skills were to be so influential in the beginnings of trade-unionism a generation later. While many members of the committee might have sympathized with their views, its priority had to be the smooth running of the Society, and compromise was always necessary. The new class of reading membership introduced in 1799 was such a compromise. Securing a majority for its introduction at the Anniversary Meeting would probably have been easy, not least because existing members could already borrow books that their whole family could then access. The subsequent exchange makes it

clear that it was never intended to publicize the new class of membership, so women with no connection to the Society would never find out that they might become members, and it could be assumed that in practice nothing would change.

The New Institution, however, became a focus of discontent that got out of hand before the committee could implement any compromise. The Annual Report for 1805 addresses the concern of members that the Lit & Phil subsidized it, arguing, with some justification at that date, that membership had increased because of its establishment, and that the Society had gained apparatus worth about £500 as a result of the appeal to set it up. There was no trouble until 1808 when the purchase of a model steam engine for £32. 12. 0 from Clennell's brother-in-law, Samuel Clegg (who had been apprenticed to Boulton and Watt), triggered complaints that the New Institution was a drain on the Society's resources. The resulting dispute was essentially about the financial arrangements, and, although it became a vehicle for the expression of many other complaints, the subject of women's attendance does not appear in any of the extensive material from that period, both printed and manuscript, that survives.

It is possible that the New Institution lectures had contributed to the acceptance of women. The lectures were held in the Society's library (another concern addressed in 1805), and, if any women did take advantage of the opportunity to attend them, they would often have been seen there. It was immediately after the conclusion of his first series of lectures in 1803 that, for the first time, William Turner's name appears in the records of the Society that relate to women.

John Clennell in 1799 and Robert Spence Watson a century later both asserted that the Lit & Phil was the first learned society in the country to admit women. That could be true although the Liverpool Athenaeum (a library rather than a learned society) allowed women readers from its foundation in 1797. The refusal to publicize the change in rules ensured that the innovation could have little impact, and the New Institution lectures (which were publicized) were probably more significant. Darwin's *Plan for the Conduct of Female Education in Boarding Schools* was one of the first works to advocate Natural Philosophy as a suitable subject for girls; Turner's lectures were probably the first to make any scientific education available to adult women, with a price structure that seems designed to encourage their attendance.

Few details of the struggle for the acceptance of women in the Lit & Phil survive. The radicals who were prepared to go against prevailing opinion had to put their names to recommendations and proposals, so they are known, and there is also some evidence of their social networks, but the men who opposed them are generally invisible, since the votes of individuals, even if not secret, were not recorded. The true views of the men responsible for running the Society, those influencing it, or simply the respectable gentlemen who made up the bulk of the membership, can only be guessed. The real changes that they did help to implement, such as the abolition of slavery, the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, or parliamentary reform, all required compromise, and drew on resources of time and energy that were not inexhaustible. The example of parliamentary reform, which formally disenfranchised women for the first time in English law, demonstrates how some compromises could be contrary to the interests of women.

The women themselves are also largely invisible. All that remains are the names of Reading Members in Annual Reports (and the minutes of Monthly Meetings), which is probably why that new class of membership is remembered more than the possible presence of women at the lectures. There are no records of attendance at the lectures, so the presence of women is

not certain. If any women were there, and the record relating to Mrs Wilson suggests that teachers might have attended, the details of any benefit to them, their family or their pupils, are also lost to history.

NOTES

[1] The Lit & Phil archives are not catalogued, and records are shelved as 'Minutes of Monthly Meetings', 'Annual Report', 'Recommendations Book' and so on, with a date where appropriate.
[2] During this period membership lists were published along with the Annual Report.
[3] Tyne and Wear Archives, C.NC66/9.

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