

Christine D. Myers
*University Coeducation in the Victorian Era:
Inclusion in the United States and
the United Kingdom*

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The story of women's admission into men's universities is both emotional and compelling. "I can hardly keep the tears from my eyes—such a day," Margaret Boyd told her diary in 1873, after hearing a sermon in which she was praised as the first female graduate of Ohio University (167). In *University Coeducation in the Victorian Era*, Christine D. Myers faithfully includes the voices of many such pioneers, and her study provides a fascinating account of the movement that transformed academia in the late-nineteenth century. Yet Myers' study does not present a simple story of great women battling against the odds, the popular historiographical approach to women's higher education that historian Gillian Sutherland has described as "one of the last bastions of heroic fairy-tale" (23). Rather than focus on the distinctiveness of individual trailblazers, Myers is concerned instead to explore how the larger social forces present in the Victorian era were reflected in all facets of women's higher education: the inclusion of women students, their experience in the classroom, their participation in extracurricular activities and student publications, and their careers after graduation. While admiring the accomplishments of individuals like Margaret Boyd, Myers provides a clear-eyed assessment of the extent to which women were integrated into the world of men. Far from representing a rupture in prevailing societal beliefs, Myers concludes that coeducation actually reinforced established Victorian gender roles.

Impressive in scope, *University Coeducation in the Victorian Era* incorporates research on twenty-four institutions in England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, as well as the midwestern, southern, and Ohio Valley regions of the United States. Myers

selected only comprehensive, state-supported universities, maintaining that these institutions were accountable to the public, and therefore most useful in charting society's responses to the decision to integrate women. Although sensitive to regional and institutional differences, Myers examines the common response of men's universities to the admission of women, and she carefully rejects assumptions based either on the experiences of individual students, or on the distinctiveness of single institutions.

Myers' decision to adopt a comparative approach allows her to search for larger patterns in higher education on both sides of the Atlantic. These patterns, she points out, were remarkably consistent. *University Coeducation in the Victorian Era* portrays British and American universities during a period of rapid social change, a time when established traditions confronted new, more egalitarian views about the role of higher education in society. Myers therefore places the integration of women into the context of the broader changes affecting state-supported universities in the late-nineteenth century: secularization, the inclusion of more modern and practical subjects in the curriculum, the growth of students' roles in university affairs, and new views on the universities' responsibility in shaping the nation's youth. One of the book's most important contributions is to demonstrate how concerns over the integration of women can be understood in light of more general anxieties about the relevancy of the universities in a time of change. Myers presents coeducation as both a product of these changes, and simultaneously as a cause of further anxiety. Once admitted, women students sparked further debates about their impact on academic standards and the long-term reputation of coeducational universities.

As a response to these concerns, university officials regulated women students, establishing strict rules for women's residences, providing separate courses of study, and assuming the role of *in loco parentis* to monitor the behaviour of female students on campus. While this tendency has been explored in other studies of coeducational universities, Myers asserts that regulation also came from within the student body. The reinforcement of separate spheres in academia was not just a top-down process, Myers claims, but involved the active collaboration of the students themselves. As students gained agency in university affairs, they increasingly asserted their wish to maintain separate extracurricular activities, and their publications highlight the importance of dating and male/female relationships. Mining the rich primary sources of student newspapers and journals, as well as first-hand accounts by faculty and administrators, Myers concludes that larger societal expectations concerning separate male and female spheres were reinforced deliberately within academia by officials and students, creating a polarization of the curricular and extracurricular worlds on the basis of gender.

University Coeducation in the Victorian Era offers an analysis that is at once meticulous in detail and far-reaching in its implications. The book's thorough research and extensive scope reminds us not to romanticize the period of early coeducation; that it is inaccurate to expect too much from the Victorians. To interpret the admission of women in heroic terms is to project our own emotional attachment to this story onto the first generations of female graduates. The rigidity of separate spheres ideology relaxed only slowly, and it would be future generations of women in the twentieth

century who benefited from greater confidence and expanded choices. Myers presents a movement that was fundamentally cautious, one in which most participants—administrators and students alike—wished to broaden but not change a woman's place in society.