

Some four years ago I began to put together a proposal for a research project into the lives of middle class women in Carmarthen during the latter half of the nineteenth century. In conversation with my brilliant tutor at Aberystwyth university we debated firstly, what the title of such a work might be and secondly whether within the town of Carmarthen we would ever find sufficient material to write a thesis of 100K words. Well on the first question...'The Naming of Women' became the title and on the second question the lives of these women, documented as they could be, as they should be, would probably run to twice the word count given. No longer the hesitancy of that first meeting when we sat and thought only the town, perhaps we should include the county, perhaps we should say SW Wales. As I said to my tutor many months ago...if one of these women has one foot the wrong side of Carmarthen Bridge, she's out of it.

These women had lives that, in so many ways, changed the society they lived in and shaped the society that we live in today. They were philanthropists, they were educators, they were political activists, they were travelers, they were commentators on the world around then. They were women who would for the first time enter the professions of medicine, science, education, business and public service. They were women who gave aspirations to their daughters and to their sons but whose stories have been forgotten, the stories that the Women's Archive Wales tries to tell. The story of how different the world, how different our lives would have been today without the change that their lives brought about.

So today I could stand here and speak to you of some of the first female doctors and their work, of a woman who was one of the pioneers of the nursing system as we know in Great Britain. Of the educationalist who changed education for women, not just in Great Britain, but all over the World but who always returned to her first love, the education of the girls and women of Wales. Or I could tell you of the nineteen-year-old, who knocked on the door of one of the most prestigious scientific institutions in the world and said give us a job...and they

did for the next fifty years. I could tell of hunger strikers, public orators, of women who faced down and challenged poor law guardians, of others who, in the mini ice ages of the late nineteenth century fed hundreds of children every day in the town, others who founded and ran women's charities and maternity charities, to which some of us in Carmarthen may owe our very existence.

But what about their relationship with the arts? The one thing these women had in common they were very well acquainted with the arts. Their education was based on literature, languages, music, drawing, painting, dancing and fine needlework. Many of them had to leave Carmarthen, leave Wales to get an education, others were educated in the small schools for young ladies which were established in the town before the coming of the much larger High School and Girls' County School. Only certain parts of what we would regard as a full curriculum were deemed suitable for girls. This remained true until later in the century, even well into the 20th century. There was a huge struggle, on ideological grounds, about how the capabilities and capacities of women were regarded, to introduce science into the curriculum at any girls' school...the County Girls School in particular.

**MISS REES'S
SEMINARY FOR YOUNG LADIES,
CARMARTHEN.**

MISS REES begs to return her grateful thanks to her Friends for the liberal patronage she experienced when conducting the above Establishment, and respectfully informs them, that she has declined in favour of Miss PRICE. Miss PRICE's SEMINARY will RE-OPEN JULY 24th, when she hopes to merit her share of public favour. From her experience in teaching, Miss Price feels confident of giving satisfaction to the Parents of the Young Ladies committed to her care.

	TERMS:—	Per Ann.	Entrance.
	£ s. d.	£ s. d.	£ s. d.
Terms, with Instruction in English, Grammar, History, Geography, and Useful and Ornamental Work	22 1 0	1 1 0	1 1 0
Day Boarders	10 10 0	0 10 6	0 10 6
Day Scholars	3 0 0	0 10 6	0 10 6
Music	6 6 0	1 1 0	1 1 0
Dancing	5 5 0	1 1 0	1 1 0
Drawing	4 4 0		
French	3 3 0		
Use of the Globes	2 2 0		
Writing and Arithmetic	2 2 0		
Washing	3 0 0		

Each Young Lady must be provided with one pair of sheets and six towels.
A quarter's notice or a quarter's payment is required previous to the removal of a pupil.

So as you can see there is no problem with teaching girl's languages, history literature. No harm in teaching them how to draw or dance or play a musical

instrument. You'll notice that the curriculum steers clear of anything scientific or anything overly mathematical. Arithmetic is allowed (as an extra) because you need numeracy to keep household accounts.

The Spurrell sisters of King Street, who we'll come back to later, were taught at Misses Morris' school in Quay Street in the 1850s and 60s. The curriculum there was German, French, drawing dancing, English language and literature, music taught by a German music professor, Herr Hauptmann.

As many local newspapers of the time feature advertisements for schools in such places as Laugharne, Tenby, Cardiff, Newport, Herefordshire and Bristol, it may be reasonably assumed that these boarding schools were attended by young women from Carmarthen. It is possible to trace young women from Carmarthen who studied at Hope Corner House in Taunton Cheltenham Ladies College, Stratford Park Abbey College in Stroud and the Royal School for the Daughters of Army Officers in Bath. It appears that there was ample opportunity for the middle class girls of Carmarthen to access an education away from the town if family finances allowed.

Getting back to these small schools (17). With one notable exception, it is not known where, how, or to what standard the teachers at these schools had themselves accessed education. This exception is an extraordinary one, as in 1851, Miss Margaretta Davies gave notice of the resumption of term at her establishment in St. Peter's Street, Carmarthen. The advertisement stated that 'Miss Davies was nine years a pupil at the Clergy School in Casterton, and for some years a resident governess in the Families of a Baronet and eminent Physician'.¹ Casterton School, originally known as Cowan Bridge School, had been founded in the 1820s by an evangelical clergyman, who had sought to place 'a good female education within the reach of the poorest clergy'.² This was the school attended by the Brontë sisters and Margaretta Davies was an exact

¹ *The Welshman*, 24 January 1851, p.3.

² Mary Robinson, *Emily Brontë* (London, 1883), p.29.

contemporary of theirs, having been born in 1818, the same year as Emily.³ For this reason, many accounts exist of the curriculum of the school and the conditions in which its pupils lived. Margaretta Davies was one of several children born to the Revd Joshua Davies who, in 1830, was vicar of Llangadog, Carmarthenshire (where he had been living since 1817) and vicar of Brechfa, in the same county, by 1841.⁴ It may be presumed that the family decided to send Margaretta, who was one of the eldest children in the family to this school for the 'daughters of poor clergy' in order that she might 'receive a fair education at a nominal price'.⁵ The distance from Llangadog to Casterton is two hundred and eight miles and, in the 1820s, the journey must have been an extremely difficult one. Biographers of the Brontës agree on the terrible living conditions that existed at the school and it is generally acknowledged that the school was the melancholic inspiration for the fictional 'Lowood' found in *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte's publication of 1847.⁶ Casterton advertised itself as being,

on the turnpike road from Leeds to Kendal...each pupil pays £14 a year (half in advance) for clothing, lodging, boarding and educating, £1 entrance towards the expense of books and £3 entrance for pelisses, frocks, bonnets etc. which they wear all alike. If French, music or drawing is learnt, £3 a year additional is paid for each of these...the great object in view is their intellectual and religious improvement, and to give that plain and useful education which may best fit them to return with respectability and advantage to their own homes; or to maintain themselves in the different stations of life which providence may call them.⁷

The school had a superintendent, eight teachers and two under-teachers while its pupils were described as being 'poor little prisoners, shivering and starved, in

³ Census Returns of England and Wales, 1851, St. Peter's District, Carmarthen.

⁴ Pigot's Directory for South Wales, 1830, p.846; Census Returns of England and Wales, 1841,

Brechfa District, Carmarthenshire.

⁵ Robinson, *Emily Brontë*, p. 33.

⁶ Clare Harman, *Charlotte Brontë: A Life* (London 2015), p.37.

⁷ Robinson, *Emily Brontë*, p.29.

an unkind asylum from friends and liberty... [who ate] horrible resurrection pies made of unappetising scraps and rancid fat... [however they were] so anxious to learn, that no doubt they willingly accepted the cold, hunger [and] deliberate unkindness'.⁸ Despite these terrible living conditions, including the fact that, at one time, forty-five out of eighty pupils had typhus and two of the Brontë sisters (Maria and Elizabeth) would fall mortally ill while pupils there, the education that girls received there was described as 'excellent, thorough and good'.⁹ As for Margaretta Davies, the 'station to which providence called her', that of governess to two wealthy families and, later, as a teacher, was probably not untypical of the lives of many lower middle class women who were able to access education for themselves in the early to mid-nineteenth century.

So in Carmarthen by the late 1800s we have a group of women who are educated according to a curriculum very biased towards the arts.

What impact does this have on their lives and the lives of others?

The women of Carmarthen were always good for putting on concerts, entertaining the inmates of the workhouse and the asylum at the drop of a hat. They'd have major roles in performances at the Assembly Rooms. You can easily find them at the forefront of any charity event. Some of these events had programs that had over thirty separate items.

They trained choirs, they played the organs in churches and chapels. They ran Sunday Schools and they organised trips and entertainments.

They found a level of fulfilment in these things, but they also acquired many other skills along the way but there was more to come.

⁸ Robinson, *Emily Brontë*, pp.30-35.

⁹ Robinson, *Emily Brontë*, pp.32-38; Harman, *Charlotte Brontë: A Life*, p.46.

They entered worlds beyond the private and domestic which proved to be their springboard into public life. They were, like the chickens in that great feminist film.. Nick Parke's *Chicken Run*... organised..

In 1866, the family of a Unitarian minister, David Evans, was shattered by the death of his wife and young son within 6 weeks of each. One of the most touching pieces of writing I've ever dealt with is the description given by the aunty of the little boy of how they tried to find an artist to take 'dear Herbert's likeness' as he lay dying from scarlet fever. After several unsuccessful attempts by other artists, Miss Edith Hunter 'made a painting of poor dear Herbert in his cradle'. Herbert was 2 years 18 weeks and 2 days when he died, his life span recorded with a poignant accuracy by his grieving father. Living as we do in our world of camera phones, facetime, instant images from all over the planet, can we even begin to imagine the value of that little portrait so eagerly sought, so tenderly done?

This same Edith Hunter became the first secretary of the RSPCA in south Wales and was known internationally for her work.

Nothing quite a political cartoon is there? These were drawn by Alice Abadam of Picton Terrace, Carmarthen the suffragist and orator, of her tour of Scotland in 1911.

This is the woman who won the piano competition at the eisteddfod in Blaenau Ffestiniog in 1898 playing Chopin's Nocturnal and Bach's Prelude and Fugue. Joseph Parry was the judge. She could write and /or speak Welsh, English, German, French, Latin and classical Greek.

What were these women reading? Here's is Laura Hirtzell's (Parade) reading list for 1872, nothing very subversive about that is there?

The list includes: *The Minister's Wooing* by Mrs Stowe, *Lost and Saved* by Mrs Norton, *Verner's Pride* by Mrs H. Wood and *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen. The Mrs Stowe in question was Harriet Beecher Stowe and the novel, a sequel to

Uncle Tom's Cabin, published in 1859 is described as a 'domestic comedy that examines slavery, Protestant theology, and gender differences in early America'. Reading this within a few years of the end of the American Civil War. The little lady who stared this big war. Unitarian sympathies with the anti-slavery movement.

Caroline Norton (1808-1877) was a radical author who, in her writing and lobbying, sought to change the laws on child custody, legal separation and the ownership of property by women.¹⁰ Described as 'an abused wife' by Joan Perkin, Norton was accused by her husband of having an affair with Lord Melbourne, the then Prime Minister. The actions of her estranged husband, including barring her from seeing their children and confiscating her money and property, led her to publish pamphlets relating to her situation. The novel that Laura read was a semi-autobiographical one which raised these various issues and was set, partially, in Tenby.¹¹

Verner's Pride (a novel whose plot is centred around the inheritance of an estate) and *Pride and Prejudice* were amongst the works of the best known female authors of the nineteenth century. From Laura's reading material it is possible to perceive her deep interest in feminist issues and her liberal politics.

Through this list, like anyone's reading list, we begin to get an idea of their values, what they hoped and worked for. There is no such thing as a neutral reading list. Like all art and literature it transcends time. We can read these books and we can listen to the same music, appreciate their art, we can share their own written words (our generation) and understand something of their souls.

Let's go back to the Spurrells for a moment. They are family of Sarah and Walter Spurrell, the well-known publishers and printers of King Street.

7 daughters and 4 sons... off go the sons to university and become doctors and clergymen and one runs the business. One daughter marries but the other six

¹⁰ Lawrence Stone, *Road to Divorce* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 373-374.

¹¹ Perkin, *Victorian Women*, pp. 114-117; Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens*, p.51; *The Guardian*, 12 June 2006.

stay at home in Carmarthen for many years... certainly while the mother is alive. Doing little bits in the business (or maybe more than we think?), (Edith the lynchpin between America (UTAH) and Oxford... North American Indians believes he has found an ancient Welsh tribe Llewelyn Harries,) active in Church life, in Conservative party. Educated at the Misses Morris school in Quay Street, as Effie described later in her life,

'pattens...for going to school in wet weather and ran well in them, the Bagnalls and ourselves making a great clatter in Quay Street where Miss Morris' school was'.¹² This small school took boarders as well as day pupils up to the age of sixteen and, by 1854, had engaged 'a French Teacher (Protestant)' for their charges.¹³ The only evidence of we have of the standard or extent of the education is through the writings of the 'end products' but it is clear that the Spurrell sisters were literate, musical and had knowledge of foreign languages. On the death of Edith Spurrell in 1908 *Y Llan* reported, (*and, like all her brothers and sisters, she received an education of the best kind and debating with her the major issues of the day was an intellectual feast*.)¹⁴

Edith Spurrell was one of the first women to sit on the town's Education Board and she had a torrid time there...she was controversial...great advocate of Church education. Established a 'norm' that women should sit on such boards in the town.

Came the WW1...came Effie Spurrell's finest hour...one of Carmarthen's finest hours I think when Euphemia Spurrell, 64 years old was able to converse with, and translate, for the Belgium refugees who were placed in the town.

¹² Effie Spurrell, 'Reminiscences of Carmarthen', 1920, p.29, MS 22815B, NLW.
TNA: PRO, Census Returns of England and Wales, 1851, 1861, 1871, St. Peter's District, Carmarthen. Mary and Sarah Morris both describe themselves as a 'preceptresses' in the 1851 census.

¹³ *The Welshman*, 20 June 1854, p.3.

¹⁴ *Y Llan*, 11 December 1908, p.5.

Jessie Spurrell had taught and by the start of the war was 54 and was working in postal censorship in London. She was bi or tri or quarto lingual...Welsh, English, German and French.

She was certainly taught the art of good writing in her school in Carmarthen.

Dolaucothi L9534

Darkest days, despite sheltered her upbringing, all those languages, all that music and art and literature given to her in the town, had prepared her for a world that no one could ever have imagined.

17/01/1918. Greetings etc.

As we get older the beauty and value of light becomes more and more real to us and the hope of everlasting day is sweeter. Still we may hope that the powers of darkness will soon be overcome even in this world and that we may feel the blessing left to us by the sacrifice of these splendid young lives.

People seem to be very conscious these days that our greatest danger now is the possibility of the population at home losing their courage under privation. We must all brace ourselves to endure hardness of every kind.

My nieces have been at home for their holidays and we have had such a happy time as we should hardly have believed possible in war-time. We shall be returning to the old life in a week or two.

One of my nephews received the Military Cross last week. We were so proud we went to meet him at Buckingham Palace Gate.

Women and the arts in Carmarthen have been about many things over the centuries sometimes it's been about a 64-year-old woman turning to a little refugee and just making her life a little bit better. Sometimes it's been about giving an extraordinary polymath like Alice Abadam the tools to pursue a political battle right to the very end

The world we live can be a dangerous and a sad place. How much more dangerous and sad it would be without the arts. As we all know the first thing that any tyrant, any dictator that the world has ever known does is suppress the arts, they close the libraries, they destroy books and paintings, they control or exile composers and musicians.

But isn't it strange, the people who sought to control the women that I've been talking about, men and women, who tried to contain the world of these women, to give them what they thought was an appropriate and restricted education, the people who tried to bar them from so much, tried to keep them in their place, made a huge mistake because they forgot or didn't think it was important,

forgot to take away art,

Literature,

Music

As long as they had those things, they had minds that were active, consciences that cared and souls that could be touched...they developed an extraordinary and versatile set of skills and above all else they had a belief, in the potential of the human spirit, in the potential of the human mind, in the potential of what a woman might be.