

Of Bluestockings and Good Wives

A short history of the Bedford College



Bedford College, ca. 1880

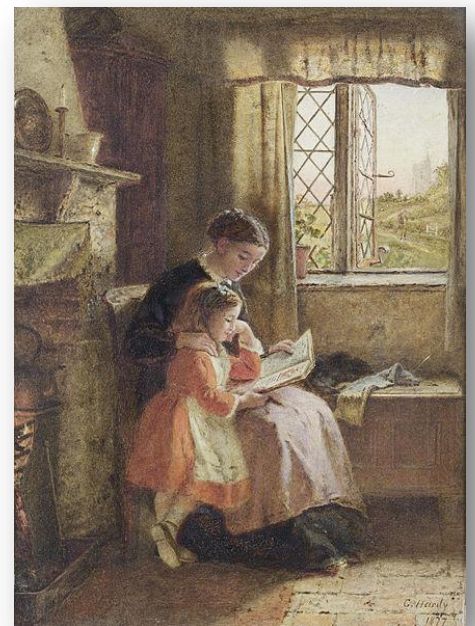
The Bedford College, playing a not unimportant role in the novel and also exemplary for the development of schooling and education of girls and young women in Victorian England, owes its existence to the vision of Elizabeth Jesser Reid.

To found a college for women – that was the lifelong dream of Mrs. Reid, born in 1789 and becoming a widow at 33, after only 13 months of marriage. With the small fortune her late husband bequeathed to her, she was not only able to travel a lot through Europe but also to fulfill her dream.

Though she had no institution in her mind to enable girls to strive for an independent professional life; rather, her college was to cultivate the mind. Its students were to acquire some knowledge to prevent them from descending into vapidty on their predetermined path as daughters, wives and mothers.

For in those days it was considered desirable for women of society to show some amiable brainlessness. Without a doubt, young ladies had to know how to lead a household but didn't possess any skills in practical housekeeping, except embroidery and other kinds of needlework. They were to be a part of society by proving themselves as good hostesses without contributing more than trivial topics like fashion or gossip to conversations; by enjoying dances and innocuous flirts and at the most becoming involved in charitable activities.

But Mrs. Reid believed that the mind of these girls and young women should by all means formed and trained by systematic learning. By occupying themselves with literature, science and





Secretly - Eva Gonzalès, 1877/78

humanities they were to become better wives and more insightful mothers. To Mrs. Reid, education was not an end in itself but affiliated to moral benefits.

Nothing subversive with this notion – but nevertheless one far ahead of its time. And when she finally brought her college into being at Bedford Square in 1849, men as well as women reacted with resentments. For contrary to the Queen's College for girls and women founded one year before, Mrs. Reid's college did not aim at sending out better trained governesses out into the world but wanted something more: to widen the horizons of the students and to open their perspectives, in addition promising them indirectly freedom and a meaning in life.

The project of this college gave Mrs. Reid numerous sleepless nights, as there was no promotion or support by the royal house nor by the upper class like for the Queen's College; with this endeavor, she was completely on her own.

An endeavor with only modest success at first. In the founding years, from 1849 to 1851, altogether only 68 girls from age 14 onwards attended the college, and 42 of them only one of the offered courses each. In 1870 and 1871, there were still less than 50 students and in subsequent years, the number hardly increased. It was not until 1876 that there was a leap from 55 students in the year before to straight away 100; a number that was to be constantly high well into the 1880s.

The curriculum changed, too. Had it comprised bible studies, harmonics and piano and singing lessons in the beginning, art, English, French, German and Latin, ancient, medieval and modern history, mathematics and geography, later Greek, political economies, botany and zoology were added; from general nature philosophy, chemistry and physics emerged. Geology amplified the schedule just as physiology and educational science and later journalism, and soon the lessons at the Bedford kept pace with the latest developments of science, with psychology, bacteriology, scientific hygiene and biochemistry.

A development Elizabeth Jesser Reid was not able to witness.

After she had transformed the largest part of her wealth into a trust fund always jointly managed by three women, she died in 1866.



Employing a Governess - Emily Shanks, late 19th century

When the lease at Bedford Square expired and was not extended, the college moved to York Place No. 8 and 9 for its 25th birthday in 1874. The school term of 1879/80 came with an almost revolutionary development: for the first time in history, colleges were able to offer courses preparing women for examinations by which they could obtain a degree of the University of London. It was still a long way to the emancipation of women in education and studies, to an occupational independence - but at least it was a start.



Newcomer at School - Emily Shanks, 1892

In 1900, the Bedford became a partner college of the University of London; growing steadily, it was renamed *Bedford College for Women* in 1909, moving into specifically planned and constructed accommodations at Regent's Park in 1913, festively opened by Queen Mary.

After individual male students were allowed to partake in lessons by a special permit, the college got opened for men as well in 1965 and bore again its initial name *Bedford College*.

The Bedford can praise itself to have had George Eliot as a student (if only for one term) and also the actor Jeremy Northam. Bedford raised the first female lawyer (class of 1857) and the first female professor at an English university. The first department of Social Sciences in Great Britain came here into being in 1918, and the first two women becoming fellows of the Royal Society were as well students of Bedford. It was the first college students learned to draw from living models – and it is also said (and yes, this has to be mentioned as well!) that the bob haircut, coming into fashion towards the end of World War I and determining the Roaring Twenties, also originated in Bedford College.

At the beginning of the 1980s, there were roughly 1,700 students and 200 academic staff in 20 departments, before merging in 1985 with the Royal Holloway College (initially as well an all-women college) to the *Royal Holloway and Bedford New College* (RHBNC, simplified in common language use to Royal Holloway, University of London or RHUL) still existing today.



Clara Bow, 1921

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