

New Collections for New Women: Collecting and Commissioning Portraits at the Early Women's University Colleges

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In 1899 Irish suffragist Dorothea Roberts gave Bedford College a portrait of Millicent Fawcett (1847–1929) by the artist Theodore Blake Wirgman (*Fig. 1*).¹ That year Fawcett accepted an honorary LLD from the University of St Andrews, one of the first honorary degrees awarded to a woman, and Roberts's donation thus marked an important celebratory moment for the women's higher education movement. As a gift to one of the earliest women's colleges in the country, the portrait joined a growing collection of portraits of pioneering professional women at Bedford College. The art collections at the newly established women's colleges heralded a new kind of collector: collectives of educated women, staff, students, and alumnae. These women were not necessarily wealthy individuals, but as collectives they could commission artworks through the intricate networks that threaded between the different institutions promoting higher education for women.

Some context is required to understand the circumstances by which these pioneering groups of university-educated women came to commemorate their history through their art collections. The movement for university

¹ Alison Wright played an important part in the identification of this portrait, as did Michaela Jones. For details, see Imogen Tedbury, 'Vote Winner — A Newly Discovered Portrait of Millicent Fawcett Is a Significant Find', *Apollo*, 12 May 2020 <<https://www.apollo-magazine.com/millicent-fawcett-new-portrait-discovery-london/>> [accessed 6 November 2020]. The research for this article was undertaken with a fellowship from the Understanding British Portraits subject specialist network. Many thanks to Anne Manuel and Katherine O'Donnell of Somerville College, Oxford; Allan Doig, Oliver Mahony, and Sophie Ratcliffe of Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford; Laura Dennis of Newnham College, Cambridge; Donal Maguire at the Centre for Studying Irish Art, National Gallery of Ireland; and the staff of the Heinz Archive, National Portrait Gallery. I would like to thank Elizabeth Crawford, Ellis Huddart, Michaela Jones, Laura MacCulloch, Alex Schnellman, Dilara Scholz, and Annabel Valentine for sharing their knowledge and expertise on various aspects of this material. Special thanks to my friend and colleague Alison Wright. For more details of the portraits in the Royal Holloway and Bedford New College art collection, see Imogen Tedbury, *Modern Portraits for Modern Women: Principals and Pioneers from the Royal Holloway and Bedford New College Art Collection* (Egham: Royal Holloway, University of London, 2020).



Fig. 1: Theodore Blake Wirgman, *Dame Millicent Fawcett*, probably 1898, oil on canvas, 111.2 × 86.5 cm, Royal Holloway, University of London, PO471.

education for women was, in its earliest days, connected to the establishment of improved schooling and advanced teaching for girls, as well as a movement for access to education for everyone, in the form of evening lectures and continuing education programmes.² Leaders of early colleges had diverging ideas as to the strategies and principles of their offerings. Should colleges be affordable? Should colleges be residential? Should colleges provide teaching at the same level as the older male-only Oxbridge colleges?

² For an overview of women's higher education, see Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women: 1850–1920* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Carol Dyhouse, *No Distinction of Sex?: Women in British Universities 1870–1939* (London: UCL Press, 1995); and Jane Robinson, *Bluestockings: The Remarkable Story of the First Women to Fight for an Education* (London: Penguin, 2009).

Should colleges provide religious teaching and leadership? Despite their differences, colleges shared similar systems of organization. The first principals of the women's colleges had not had a university education themselves, and they were appointed to run these institutions as quasi-domestic households, with administrative responsibility for the college's finances, rules, and regulations. Colleges were governed by predominantly male boards of governors or college councils, elected from 'members of the college', groups that consisted of founders, benefactors, and advisers. These structures effectively locked out female teaching staff from involvement in college governance. In these circumstances, associations and clubs of staff, students, and alumnae became increasingly important. Women who studied and taught at these colleges were connected to their alma mater for life. They connected to other colleges through the networks of alumnae working and living elsewhere.

These collectives of staff, students, and alumnae played a key role in the 'portrait transaction': that is, the negotiation between sitter and maker, conventions, and commission.³ Usual tensions between identity and identification are complicated by the purpose of these portraits as commemorations of college history, with each individual representing a passage of time. Whether collected or commissioned, these paintings construct a collective identity when they are hung together in their institutional context. Collections of portraits displayed in this way at one of the older university colleges or at an organization such as the Royal College of Physicians evoke the eponymous gallery of ancestors found in ancient family estates.⁴ Such collections engender collective remembrance, but also promote an impression of 'institutional continuity' and 'intellectual continuity' (Jordanova, *Defining Features*, p. 53, emphases in original). Suffragist Helen Blackburn (1842–1903) understood the power of portraiture to represent continuity and engender change, and she gathered together an unprecedented collection of historical portraits described as a 'Portrait Gallery of Eminent Women'. She donated this collection to the Women Students' Room at University College, Bristol, her alma mater, after the collection had been exhibited at the Women's Suffrage Society and the World's Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893.⁵ Nonetheless, comparable collections,

³ Joanna Woodall uses the phrase 'portrait transaction' in her introduction to *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, ed. by Joanna Woodall (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp. 1–25 (p. 7). See also Ludmilla Jordanova's expansion on the term in *Defining Features: Scientific and Medical Portraits 1660–2000* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), p. 23.

⁴ For the Royal College of Physicians, see Ludmilla Jordanova, *Physicians and Their Images* (London: Royal College of Physicians, 2018).

⁵ Deborah Cherry, *Painting Women: Victorian Women Artists* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 107–08; and Cherry, *Beyond the Frame: Feminism and Visual Culture, Britain 1850–1900* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 195. For Blackburn, see Linda Walker, 'Blackburn, Helen (1842–1903)', *ODNB* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/31905>>.

depicting female sitters celebrated for their authority, intellect, or ambition were largely unprecedented when the early women's colleges began to commission portraits of their leaders.

College art collections were in some ways the visualization of a college's radical agenda as a centre of women's education, as Deborah Cherry has noted. Artist and educationalist Barbara Bodichon (1827–1891) bequeathed her personal art collection to Girton College, Cambridge, which she had co-founded and supported financially since its foundation, and a now lost portrait of Bodichon by Emily Mary Osborn (1828–1925) was presented to Girton in 1885.⁶ However, the artistic ambitions of old students' clubs and associations were for the most part rather more conservative, with commissions generally going to leading portrait artists of the day and producing portraits that sometimes had 'nothing to differentiate [them] from family portraiture of the period' (Cherry, *Beyond the Frame*, p. 197). This response to the conflict between radical subject matter — female leaders and pioneering scholars — and a desire for visual conservatism exemplifies the conversely pioneering and cautious attitudes of women in higher education, described by Martha Vicinus as a 'double bind'. Operating among widespread arguments that education could 'unsex' women, that studying could 'drain maternal energy' and cause infertility, educational reformers were extremely cautious about social norms, even where portraiture was concerned. This caution 'locked women into a rigid mould of respectability, when they might have gained more by daring more' (Vicinus, pp. 130–51, 136). Collections of portraits were a way to enshrine memory, history, and tradition, a means to legitimize history to visitors and prospective students. As a result, collectives of women often employed artists who could be trusted to paint stylistically conservative portraits. Yet while the earliest of these portraits could be compared to family portraiture of the time, perhaps reflecting early staff's roles as maternal figures presiding over the college 'household', later artists like Philip de László (1869–1937) developed a new type of portraiture that presented the new history of education with women as its leaders.⁷

Focusing on several portraits collected and commissioned by Newnham College, Bedford College, and Royal Holloway College, this article explores the motivations, networks, and inspirations for the collections formed by some of the first women's university colleges in the United

⁶ Cherry, *Painting Women*, pp. 104–09; and Cherry, *Beyond the Frame*, pp. 195–212. For Bodichon and Osborn, see Pam Hirsch, 'Bodichon, Barbara Leigh Smith (1827–1891)', *ODNB* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/2755>>; and Charlotte Yeldham, 'Osborn, Emily Mary (1828–1925)', *ODNB* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/48916>>.

⁷ Cherry notes that Rudolf Lehmann's portrait of Emily Davies, presented to Girton College in 1880, shows her as 'conventional and even old-fashioned', with 'nothing to differentiate it from family portraiture of the period' (*Beyond the Frame*, p. 197).

Kingdom. College histories came to be represented by portraits of individuals responsible for their guidance, from founders and supporters to lady visitors and lecturers. As women's higher education became more established, a new subgenre of portraiture emerged, which presented serious likenesses of older women, celebrated for their intellectual achievements.

'Self-possession and quiet energy': immortalizing the founders of Newnham College, Cambridge

As Alice Gardner notes in her *Short History of Newnham College*, Newnham 'came into being gradually'. The initial idea shared between Millicent Fawcett, philosopher Henry Sidgwick (1838–1900), and classicist Marion Kennedy (1836–1914) manifested itself in 1869 as the Association for Promoting the Higher Education of Women in Cambridge.⁸ That year, Cambridge Lectures for Ladies began, and Emily Davies founded a women's college at Hitchin (later Girton College).⁹ In 1871 Sidgwick rented a house at 75 Regent Street, Cambridge for five young women who wished to attend these lectures. These students were looked after by Anne Jemima Clough (1820–1892), previously a school headmistress, later the college's first principal, who resided with the young women and oversaw their education.¹⁰ This group of students moved to Newnham Hall, the first building on its current site, in 1875. In 1880 the idea of the 'College' became a college in title, and in 1881 women were permitted to sit the University of Cambridge examinations, a process known as 'the Graces'.¹¹

In April 1881 the Newnham College Old Students' Club held its first meetings at the Working Women's College in London. This organization held regular social gatherings, published an annual letter, and collected

⁸ Alice Gardner, *A Short History of Newnham College, Cambridge* (Cambridge: Bowes & Bowes, 1921), p. 13. For Marion Kennedy, see Christopher Stray, 'Kennedy, Marion Grace (1836–1914)', *ODNB* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/48417>>.

⁹ Davies took an opposing view to those held by the Association for Promoting the Higher Education of Women in Cambridge. She considered that no concessions should be made for women at university. For Girton, see Barbara Stephen, *Girton College 1869–1932* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933; repr. 2010). See also, Emily Davies, *The Higher Education of Women* (London: Strahan, 1866); and Sara Delamont, 'Davies, (Sarah) Emily (1830–1921)', *ODNB* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/32741>>.

¹⁰ For Clough, see Gillian Sutherland, *Faith, Duty and the Power of Mind: The Cloughs and Their Circle 1820–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and Gillian Sutherland, 'Clough, Anne Jemima (1820–1892)', *ODNB* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/5710>>.

¹¹ Gardner, pp. 50–55. See also, Gillian Sutherland, "'... nasty forward minxes": Cambridge and the Higher Education of Women', in *The Transformation of an Elite? Women and Higher Education since 1900*, conference papers, 24 September 1998, pp. 85–98, Cambridge University Library, GBR/0265/UA/Conf.IV.

subscriptions to contribute to Newnham's finances (Sutherland, *Faith*, p. 121). In the first decade of its foundation, its most significant contribution to college life was its commission of the college's first portraits, perhaps inspired by an earlier group of former students who had given the college a portrait of Clough by William Blake Richmond (1842–1921) in 1883 (*Fig. 2*). In 1887 the club commissioned society portrait painter James Jebusa Shannon (1862–1923) to paint two portraits of founder Henry Sidgwick and his wife Eleanor (née Balfour, 1845–1936), who would later succeed Clough as principal (*Fig. 3*).¹² After the success of these first portraits, the club solicited subscriptions for two further portraits by Shannon, of Clough (*Fig. 4*) and Honorary Secretary Marion Kennedy, completed in 1890 and 1892, respectively.



Fig. 2: William Blake Richmond, *Anne Jemima Clough, First Principal*, 1882, oil on canvas, 90 × 69.5 cm, Newnham College, University of Cambridge, VPC-PP-001.

¹² For Eleanor Sidgwick, see Helen Fowler, 'Sidgwick [née Balfour], Eleanor Mildred (1845–1936)', *ODNB* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/36086>>.



Fig. 3: James Jebusa Shannon, *Eleanor Sidgwick, Principal (1892–1910)*, 1892, oil on canvas, 127 × 102 cm, Newnham College, University of Cambridge, VPC-PP-003.

The decision to commission portraits of these figures indicates the extent to which this group had remained leading figures in Newnham life, despite the college's expansion. Clough lived in the college's residential hall, where she presided over the students' pastoral and domestic life as well as their studies. When a second residential hall was opened in 1881, Eleanor Sidgwick became vice principal, and she and her husband moved in to take care of this second residence (Gardner, pp. 35–37). Many of the non-resident students boarded with Marion Kennedy and her sister at their family home in the city (Stray, 'Kennedy'). In this way the earliest students, who were by 1887 members of the Old Students' Club, would have had a close personal relationship with at least one of the four founders.

The choice of James Jebusa Shannon for this commission suggests that the Old Students' Club was intending to make a significant financial contribution to the college through their art patronage. American-born Shannon was a society portraitist and founder member of the New English



Fig. 4: James Jebusa Shannon, *Anne Jemima Clough, First Principal*, 1890, oil on canvas, 127 × 102 cm, Newnham College, University of Cambridge, VPC-PP-005.

Art Club, who spent his career in Britain.¹³ Described as John Singer Sargent's 'most formidable rival', this now neglected painter had risen to fame thanks to the patronage of the Duchess of Rutland, for whom he was 'virtually a court painter'.¹⁴ In 1888, the year after he received the Newnham commission, Shannon moved from his Chelsea studio at the Merton Villas Studios to a larger space at the Alexandra Studios in Kensington. In 1892 he moved again, purchasing a property on Holland Park Road next door to Frederic, Lord Leighton, by then the president of the Royal Academy

¹³ For Shannon, see Barbara Dayer Gallati, *Seeking Beauty: Paintings by James Jebusa Shannon* (New York: Force, 2014); James Creelman, 'An American Painter of the English Court', *Munsey's Magazine*, November 1895, pp. 126–37; and Lewis Hind, 'The Work of J. J. Shannon', *Studio*, 8 (1896), 66–75 <<https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.17297.11>>.

¹⁴ Kenneth McConkey, *Edwardian Portraits: Images of an Age of Opulence* (Woodbridge: Antique Collectors' Club, 1987), p. 119.

(Gallati, pp. 8–9). At the height of his fame, he painted about eight or ten portraits a year, making between £1000 and £1500 per portrait (£80,000–£100,000 today), and he was so much in demand that sitters sometimes had to wait a year or two to sit for their portrait.¹⁵ To commission paintings from Shannon in the late 1880s and 1890s signified a certain fashionableness, to say nothing of a certain wealth.

Shannon was not only fashionable in the status of his sitters, but also recognizably contemporary in his painterly style. His four portraits for Newnham exhibit his experimentation with the technical innovations of French modernism, such as the ‘square brush’ technique inspired by Jules Bastien-Lepage and the broken brushwork of Impressionism, as well as an affinity with the limited palettes and tonal range favoured by James Abbott McNeill Whistler (Gallati, p. 6). Yet Shannon was distinguished, like his contemporary and rival Sargent, for his fusion of innovation with the traditions of British academic portraiture, with references to Sir Joshua Reynolds, George Romney, and Sir Thomas Lawrence in his portraits of sitters such as Lady Barber. His sitters, the Newnham quartet among them, are captured in his characteristic approach, which coupled innovative brushwork with conservative treatment of his subjects. The Newnham portraits demonstrate Shannon’s sensitivity to his task of capturing his sitters’ energy and intellect while maintaining their womanly respectability. His brushwork brought lightness and femininity to the women’s clothing, and their demure seated poses within a domestic setting present them as feminine and unthreatening.¹⁶ When his portraits of the Sidgwicks were exhibited at the New Gallery in 1889, a reviewer for the *Illustrated London News* singled out Shannon’s portrait of Eleanor Sidgwick, commenting that Shannon had ‘brought into the earnest face a sense of self-possession and quiet energy which go far to explain the success of Mrs Sidgwick’s career in a position beset with difficulties’.¹⁷ This energy is indicated in her pose, leaning forwards towards us as if about to speak. Yet Shannon could also show a more introspective side to his sitters’ characters. While Richmond’s portrait of Clough presents the sitter at work writing a letter, Shannon presents Clough in a moment of private reflection. Alice Gardner, the historian who was among Newnham’s first students, noted that Shannon’s portrait was ‘a sympathetic study of calm, benevolent, but alert old age, suggestive of ripe experience and of a patient outlook on life’ (pp. 78–79). As a group, their characters are caught in turn earnest, reflective, or direct, presenting a unified personification of the scholarship and energy expected at Newnham, while maintaining a safe, feminine respectability.

¹⁵ Kitty Shannon, *For My Children* (London: Hutchinson, 1933), pp. 100, 121.

¹⁶ See Jordanova’s discussion of portrayals of the scientist Mary Somerville (*Defining Features*, pp. 110–15).

¹⁷ ‘The New Gallery’, *Illustrated London News*, 18 May 1889, p. 627.

The commission of a second portrait of the principal from Shannon in 1890, an addition to Richmond's earlier portrait, suggests that the Old Students' Club was thinking carefully about the future display of these portraits in the college. Shannon's quartet of portraits were intended to function as a set — they all measure about 127 × 102 cm, his preferred dimensions for three-quarter length portraits that present each sitter at near life-size — and as such they commemorate the college's early history, providing a visual synergy with the older collections displayed in other university colleges.¹⁸ As Gardner noted, these portraits were 'pleasing and profitable reminders to the students, at their meals, debates, and dancing, of the character as well as the appearance of those to whom they owe their present happy opportunities' (p. 79).

The Old Students' Club commissioned artworks for suitable locations in the more private parts of the college, as well as the more public-facing rooms. This seems to have been the case in 1888, when the club commissioned Richmond to paint another portrait for the college, of Helen Gladstone (1849–1925), Clough's assistant, who resided with her and the residents of North Hall (later Clough Hall). Gladstone was the daughter of William Gladstone and one of the earliest students to study at Newnham. Her involvement with the college was, Gardner reports, a matter of some pride among students.¹⁹ This portrait complements Richmond's earlier portrait of Clough in its composition, with Gladstone presented in a three-quarter length view looking to the right, and it is of a similar height, probably intended as a pendant to be hung alongside Richmond's portrait of Clough, perhaps at North Hall. Private areas of the college also displayed paintings that could be interpreted as rather more controversial: for example, a now lost painting retitled 'Towards the Dawn' by Quaker and spiritualist artist Emily Ford (1850–1930), given to Newnham by Millicent Fawcett (Cherry, *Beyond the Frame*, pp. 200–12). The painting, an allegory imbued with renewed and potentially radical significance thanks to its new title and location, was hung in Newnham's Common Room, where it would have been visible to staff and students.

By contrast, Shannon's quartet of portraits in the dining hall were visible to all guests who visited the college, whether they were visiting members of the university, prospective students and their parents, or dinner guests of Newnham staff and students. Their prominence seems to have made Shannon a favourite among the networks that stretched across

¹⁸ For example, Shannon's 1894 portrait of Diana McDonald (Brighton and Hove Museums and Art Galleries) measures 125 × 98 cm; his 1899 portrait of Lord Cranworth (Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery) measures 127 × 101.6 cm; and his 1909 portrait of Miss Chloe Preston (York Art Gallery) measures 127 × 101.6 cm.

¹⁹ Gardner, p. 36. For Gladstone, see Sheila Fletcher, 'Gladstone, Helen (1849–1925)', *ODNB* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/38639>>.

the early women's colleges, for whom he undertook many similar commissions of early principals and founders. In 1892 Lady Margaret Hall, Newnham's sister college in Oxford, commissioned Shannon to paint their first principal, Dame Elizabeth Wordsworth (1840–1932). In 1897 the Royal Holloway College Association commissioned a portrait of their first principal, Matilda Ellen Bishop (1842–1913) (*Fig. 5*).²⁰ In 1899 Shannon painted Emilie Michaelis (1834–1904), first principal of Froebel College.²¹



Fig. 5: James Jebusa Shannon, *Miss Matilda Ellen Bishop*, 1897, oil on canvas, 125.7 × 101.6 cm, Royal Holloway, University of London, P1609.

²⁰ Shannon's portrait of Bishop is discussed in greater detail below.

²¹ Froebel College is now part of the University of Roehampton. For Froebel's methods and the origins of the kindergarten in Britain, see *Kindergartens and Cultures: The Global Diffusion of an Idea*, ed. by Roberta Wollons (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

He also painted Dorothea Beale, the founder and first principal of St Hilda's College, Oxford, after she received her LLD from the University of Edinburgh in 1902.²² These portraits share similar dimensions with the Newnham quartet.²³ Shannon's portraits for Newnham seem to have become exempla to these other colleges intending to memorialize their recent history. Networks and visits between different colleges were utilized to share knowledge of appropriate and preferred artists, who could be trusted to present sitters sympathetically and respectably, capturing the women's progressive ideas while maintaining conservatism in painterly style and format. The Old Students' Club's decision to raise subscriptions for portraits from Shannon suggests a canny understanding of portraits as signifiers of the college's status: as an institution that was both fashionable and respectable, appealing to prospective students and parents.

'To encourage others': suffragist and campaigner portraits at Bedford College

Bedford College shared several friends, supporters, and alumnae with Newnham. Nonetheless, its growing art collection reflected the college community's very different approaches to prestige, tradition, commemoration, and community. Founded by Elizabeth Jesser Reid (1789–1866) at 47 Bedford Square, London in 1849, Bedford was the first higher education college for women in the United Kingdom.²⁴ The college did not conform to contemporary conventions for university education, adopted by the full-time residential women's colleges at Oxford and Cambridge. Its fees were kept affordable, classes were open to non-resident students, and there was no obligation to undertake degree-length study. As a result the college operated with a lower turnover and attracted students with a lower private income than the Oxbridge colleges or Royal Holloway, as well as wealthier students who might go on to study elsewhere.

At first the college was managed by a council composed of elected members from two different committees: one of ladies and lady visitors

²² Jacqueline Beaumont, 'Beale, Dorothea (1831–1906)', *ODNB* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/30655>>.

²³ The portrait of Elizabeth Wordsworth measures 125 × 100 cm; Matilda Bishop measures 125.7 × 101.6 cm; Emilie Michaelis measures 120 × 95 cm; and the copy of Shannon's portrait of Dorothea Beale, now at St Hilda's College, measures 124 × 99 cm.

²⁴ For the history of Bedford College, see Margaret J. Tuke, *A History of Bedford College for Women, 1849–1937* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939); Linda Bentley, *Educating Women: A Pictorial History of Bedford College, University of London 1849–1985* (Egham: Royal Holloway, University of London, 1991); and Marigold Pakenham-Walsh, 'Bedford College: 1849–1985', in *Bedford College, University of London: Memories of 150 Years*, ed. by J. Mordaunt Crook (Egham: Royal Holloway and Bedford New College, 2001), pp. 13–46.

— the chaperones who accompanied young women to classes — and one of the male professors affiliated with King’s and University College London, who taught the classes. The college’s early years were dogged by dissatisfaction regarding the standard of teaching and by religious controversy, as the college’s foundational non-sectarianism came into conflict with the directives that some of the visiting professors received from their institutions. Tensions also continued between the two committees of lady visitors and professors. In 1860 Reid put £16,500 in trust and nominated three unmarried women — Eliza Bostock (1817–1898), Jane Martineau (1812–1882), and Eleanor Elizabeth Smith (1822–1896) — as trustees, on the condition that they should be succeeded by unmarried women, thus ensuring that women remained at the heart of the college’s governance.²⁵ In 1869 these women reformed the college’s constitution to improve the quality of teaching, and in 1878 Bedford students were among the first women to gain degrees after the University of London opened degree examinations to women.²⁶

Unlike some of the wealthier women’s colleges, Bedford did not commission portraits of its founders and leaders until over fifty years after its foundation.²⁷ However, the college was the recipient of several portraits depicting figures who were significant to its early life. Percy Bigland’s *Miss Henrietta Busk* (Fig. 6) commemorates one such figure. Born into a Unitarian family of progressive thinkers, Henrietta Busk dedicated her life to Bedford, serving on the college council for nearly fifty years (1882–85 and 1889–1936). She had studied at the college herself; her mother had been one of the founders, together with Reid. Later in life Busk also had an extraordinary career in local politics.²⁸ Bigland’s portrait of Busk presents the sitter during her first spell on the council. Like Shannon, Percy Bigland (1858–1926) was a founder member of the New English Art Club. The visible yet refined brushwork in his portrait of Busk reflects his training among artists of the Munich School, where he studied for seven years, and also demonstrates an interest in the looser styles developing in Paris. As Unitarians the Busk family were sympathetic to other Nonconformists and it may be that Bigland, a Quaker, was selected for the commission partly

²⁵ Eleanor Elizabeth Smith was also one of the founders of Somerville in 1879. For Smith, see Keith Hannabuss, ‘Smith, Henry John Stephen (1826–1883)’, *ODNB* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/25813>>; for Bostock, see Sophie Badham, ‘Bostock, Elizabeth Anne [Eliza] (1817–1898)’, *ODNB* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/52743>>.

²⁶ The so-called ‘London nine’ sat the General Examination for Women in 1869, but this was not a degree. See Philip Carter, ‘Oh Pioneers! Lives and Legacies of London’s Women Undergraduates, 1868–1928’, *Past and Future*, 23 (2018), 16–17.

²⁷ The first portrait commissioned by the college was that of the third principal Dame Margaret Tuke by Reginald Eves (1914). See Tedbury, *Modern Portraits*, pp. 44–45.

²⁸ Alison Bailey, ‘Henrietta Busk’ <<https://amershammuseum.org/history/people/19th-century/henrietta-busk/>> [accessed 6 November 2020].



Fig. 6: Percy Bigland, *Miss Henrietta Busk*, 1884, oil on canvas, 101.6 × 76.2 cm, Royal Holloway, University of London, PO459.

for this reason.²⁹ Bigland painted other important figures in the cause for women's higher education, such as Professor Caroline Skeel (1872–1951), reader in Classics at Westfield College, and the Quaker Elizabeth Powell Bond (1841–1926), dean of Swarthmore College, one of the earliest co-educational colleges in the United States. Henrietta Busk gave this portrait to

²⁹ There were close links between Unitarians, Nonconformists, and the suffrage movement. For example, Philippa Levine estimated that 11 per cent of a sample of 192 leading suffragists had direct links to Unitarianism. Unitarians only comprised 2 per cent of the population in the 1851 religious census. See Philippa Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England: Private Roles and Public Commitment* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 32; and an informative case study: Helen Plant, “‘Ye are all one in Christ Jesus’: Aspects of Unitarianism and Feminism in Birmingham, c. 1869–90”, *Women's History Review*, 9 (2000), 721–42. It is unknown if Busk's portrait was commissioned by Busk herself or by her father, who died in 1886.

Bedford College herself, where it hung in the Council Room in commemoration of her years of service.³⁰

Other portraits in the Bedford collection exemplify the college's reputation as an unusually radical institution, where students were permitted to take part in suffrage rallies, and female educationists and suffragists were invited to address students and the wider college community. One of these figures was Anna Swanwick (1813–1899), a translator and women's education campaigner whose name was 'universally respected' as a scholar of Ancient Greek and German.³¹ Like Elizabeth Jesser Reid and Millicent Fawcett, her signature had been among those on the suffrage petition presented by John Stuart Mill to Parliament in 1866.³² Swanwick ran an evening school from 1838, and between 1849 and 1859 she attended lectures as one of the first students at Bedford, 'to encourage others', becoming an official lady visitor chaperone in the lectures of mathematician Francis William Newman, among others.³³ In 1884 she became the college's first female visitor, a prestigious and official role as guest lecturer that was previously held by Erasmus A. Darwin (Pakenham-Walsh, p. 19). In 1885 Miss Conolly, a staff member, presented the college with a portrait of Swanwick that she had painted herself.³⁴ In 1886 another portrait of Swanwick was presented by her sister, in exchange for this first portrait by Conolly.³⁵ The latter portrait was painted by Swanwick's niece, Katherine Bruce (1852–1918), who was invited to Bedford in 1891 to 'make some alterations in the portrait'.³⁶ Today the college holds two very similar paintings of Swanwick by Bruce, and it seems that one of these, perhaps a sketch for Swanwick's

³⁰ Ex-council members' portraits were hung in the council room. Meeting of Council, 8 December 1920, Archives, Royal Holloway, University of London (RHUL Archives), BC GB/110/2/1–35 The Bedford College Archive has been held by Royal Holloway since the two colleges merged in 1985.

³¹ Anna Swanwick published translations of Goethe, Schiller, Aeschylus, and Homer, among many others. Her life and work are recorded in a biography by her niece: Mary L. Bruce, *Anna Swanwick: A Memoir and Recollections 1813–1899* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1903). See also Lorna Hardwick, 'Women, Translation and Empowerment', in *Women, Scholarship and Criticism: Gender and Knowledge c. 1790–1900*, ed. by Joan Bellamy, Anne Laurence, and Gill Perry (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 183–93.

³² For the petition and the Women's Suffrage Petition Committee, see Elizabeth Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement: A Reference Guide, 1866–1928* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 756–57.

³³ 'George Eliot, Bedford College, and Royal Holloway', *Writing Women and Suffrage*, 9 January 2018 <<https://womensuffragewritingbedfordsquare.wordpress.com/2018/01/09/george-eliot-and-anna-swanwick-at-bedford-college/>> [accessed 6 November 2020].

³⁴ Meeting of council, 16 July 1885, RHUL Archives, BC GB/110/1/4.

³⁵ Minutes of council meeting, 16 December 1886, RHUL Archives, BC GB/110/1/4.

³⁶ Minutes of council meeting, 30 January 1891, RHUL Archives, BC GB/110/1/4. At present it is unknown exactly what these alterations were.

gift, was given to the college at a later date by Swanwick's family.³⁷ These portraits present the activist as she appears in photographs later in her life, wearing a white lace cap and black jade cross over a high-necked black dress and red shawl. Swanwick's presence on the walls of Bedford College would have served as a reminder of the community's pioneering role in women's education, while commemorating the first woman to be afforded the platform as guest lecturer. Such memorials to early leaders in the suffrage movement also acted as inspirational images, enabling students to imagine themselves taking up Swanwick's cause.

Most notable among Bedford's portraits of inspirational women is a newly identified portrait of Millicent Garrett Fawcett, leading suffragist and figurehead of the movement for women's education (see *Fig. 1*). As noted above, this portrait was painted by artist and illustrator Theodore Blake Wirgman (1848–1925), and exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1898, before being given to the college in 1899. The portrait was a gift from Dorothea Roberts (1836–1922), an Irish industries campaigner and suffragist and 'old friend' to Fawcett.³⁸ Wirgman was from a family of British-Swedish intellectuals and married to Roberts's niece, which seems to have led to this commission. As a 'member of the college', Fawcett was part of the extended community of advisers to Bedford.³⁹ Her daughter Philippa attended chemistry classes in the 1880s and Fawcett herself was a visiting lecturer, when she spoke on the subject of women's education, in 1886, 1897, and 1899.⁴⁰ However, Fawcett was also an important symbolic figure at the college, as in 1899 she became one of the first women to be awarded an honorary doctoral degree, when she received her LLD from the University of St Andrews, the conferral of which was cause for great celebration among the suffrage and women's education movements' activists. The same year, Anna Swanwick also received her LLD from the University of Aberdeen.⁴¹ Women's higher education was still a controversial subject at the time. Just

³⁷ Many thanks to Alison Wright for sharing her thoughts and conclusions on Bedford College's acquisition of these portraits.

³⁸ Millicent Garrett Fawcett, *What I Remember* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1924), p. 98. Many thanks to Elizabeth Crawford for this information about Roberts.

³⁹ In 1869 Bedford College was incorporated as an association under the Board of Trade Regulations for Companies not Trading for Profit. This new constitution created a new executive council which was elected from among 'Membership of the College', also known as Membership of the Governing Body (Pakenham-Walsh, p. 19).

⁴⁰ 'Bedford College', *The Times*, 14 October 1886, p. 7; 8 October 1897, p. 4; 'Bedford College Jubilee', 24 June 1899, p. 15. Her first address was published as 'The Use of Higher Education to Women', *Contemporary Review*, November 1886, pp. 719–27.

⁴¹ David Rubinstein, *A Different World for Women: The Life of Millicent Garrett Fawcett* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p. 106; Christine D. Myers, *University Coeducation in the Victorian Era: Inclusion in the United States and the United Kingdom* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 117.

two years earlier, in 1897, Cambridge University had rejected a proposal to grant women formal recognition of their degrees, by 1713 votes to 662. Wirgman's portrait of Fawcett, painted the following year, deliberately presents Fawcett as a solitary scholar at work, dressed simply and seated in a private study.

While Roberts's gift of Fawcett's portrait to Bedford College was probably motivated by Fawcett's degree conferral that year, there is no doubt that giving — and displaying — portraits of individuals associated with the suffrage movement was a relatively progressive gesture. It is only possible to conjecture where the college's portraits of Fawcett and Swanwick were hung, but it seems likely that they were on view in the spaces frequented by staff, students, and probably governors too. It should be emphasized that many Bedford students and staff, like many women at the time, were indifferent towards suffrage. However, the subject was a permitted topic for the college debating society. In 1908 the Society for the Study of Women's Franchise was formed to enable education and discussion of the range of opinions on women's suffrage. These differing views were ultimately published in the *Balance*, a one-off magazine which was circulated to all British universities in 1913.⁴² At a time when some women's colleges were attempting to downplay connections between the campaign for women's education and campaigns for suffrage, collecting and hanging these portraits could be a form of activism, as Helen Blackburn's 'Portrait Gallery of Eminent Women' demonstrates.⁴³ Collecting portraits of women such as Busk, Swanwick, and Fawcett also provided alternative models of success to the galleries of founders and academic leaders displayed in the Oxbridge women's colleges. Instead, these portraits map a wider network of supporters and alumnae. By hanging paintings of these figures on its walls, Bedford set these women as inspirational examples to their students, demonstrating that women could do important work outside of academia as well as within.

'The personality within': new portraits for new women at Royal Holloway College

Royal Holloway College was unique among the early women's colleges for the central role its art collection played in its foundation. Founded by philanthropist and medical entrepreneur Thomas Holloway in 1879, the college was opened by Queen Victoria in 1886, who gave the college its use of the 'Royal' title. Holloway took advice from Millicent Fawcett, her sister

⁴² RHUL Archives, BC AS/200.7.

⁴³ Collections like Blackburn's deliberately attempted to tell a different history to that cultivated by collecting institutions, most notably the National Portrait Gallery.

Dr Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, Maria Grey, and Emily Davies, among others, even attempting to persuade the latter to become his first principal.⁴⁴ As well as a generous endowment of £200,000 (about £9.5m today) and an impressive building inspired by the sixteenth-century Château de Chambord, Thomas Holloway also left the college a collection of modern paintings, which was acquired at auction between 1881 and 1883 for a total sum of £84,000 (£5.6m today) and hung in the college's Picture Gallery, where most of them remain.⁴⁵ The appointment of artist Charles William Carey (1862–1943) as keeper of the Picture Gallery indicates the importance placed on this collection, which included works by Turner, Gainsborough, and Constable, as well as then famous paintings such as Edwin Landseer's *Man Proposes, God Disposes*, John Everett Millais's *Princes in the Tower*, and Edwin Long's *Babylonian Marriage Market*.⁴⁶ Any commissioned portraits were, therefore, additions to the college's fine art collection, and this may well have set a deliberate agenda to commission portraits from famous artists, renowned in their day.

Royal Holloway's portraits were commissioned by the Royal Holloway College Association (RHCA), which had a membership of staff, students, alumnae, and supporters.⁴⁷ The RHCA then elected a special portraits committee, which oversaw the details of the commission. Using the RHCA's regular publication, the *College Letter*, the committee invited subscriptions, published updates on the commission, circulated invitations to elaborate presentation ceremonies, and occasionally sent out photographic reproductions of the finished portrait.⁴⁸ These ceremonies could be very grand affairs. On 2 November 1907 Philip de László's portrait of Principal Emily Penrose was unveiled by Princess Helena, who was accompanied by her husband Prince Christian of Schleswig-Holstein (*Fig. 7*). About one hundred former students were in attendance, as well as de László, his wife Lucy, previous principal Matilda Bishop, and several representatives of the governing board. After the portrait was unveiled and presented to Penrose in the name of the subscribers, Penrose presented it to the college, and Sir Joseph Savory accepted the painting on behalf of the governors.⁴⁹ The

⁴⁴ Caroline Bingham, *The History of Royal Holloway College 1886–1986* (London: Constable, 1987), pp. 42–43.

⁴⁵ For the Thomas Holloway collection, see Tim Barringer, Mary Cowling, and Dianne Sachko Macleod, *Paintings from the Reign of Victoria: The Royal Holloway Collection*, London (London: Lincoln, 2008); and Jeannie Chapel, *Victorian Taste: The Complete Catalogue of Paintings at the Royal Holloway College* (London: Zwemmer, 1982).

⁴⁶ The Turner, Gainsborough, and Constable were sold in 1993.

⁴⁷ The RHCA was formed in July 1890 to enable former staff and students to keep in touch with College activity. Papers of the RHCA, RHUL Archives, RHC AS/902.

⁴⁸ The *College Letter* was published between 1890 and 1972. A reproduction of William Orpen's portrait of Ellen Higgins was included in the *College Letter* for 1927. RHUL Archives, RHC AS/902.

⁴⁹ 'Governors' Report', in *Royal Holloway College Letter*, 1907, RHUL Archives, RHC AS/902/40.



Fig. 7: Philip Alexius de László, *Dame Emily Penrose (1858–1942)*, 1907, oil on canvas, 116.8 × 91.5 cm, Royal Holloway, University of London, PO471.

formality of such presentation ceremonies, with the speeches and social interactions it enabled, was important to these celebrations of portrait, sitter, and, crucially, the community of alumna subscribers who had funded this new piece of college history.

As noted above, Shannon's portraits for Newnham seem to have brought him a certain reputation among other earlier women's colleges. In 1897 he was approached by the RHCA to undertake a portrait of Principal Matilda Ellen Bishop (see *Fig. 5*), who had tendered her resignation in response to disagreements with the governing board about Nonconformist services taking place alongside Anglican services in the college chapel.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Bingham, *Royal Holloway*, pp. 84–86. See also, Caroline Bingham, 'Bishop, Matilda Ellen (1842–1913)', *ODNB* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/48431>>.

Shannon was at the height of his powers and was elected as an associate of the Royal Academy the same year.⁵¹ Like his portraits for Newnham and Lady Margaret Hall, Shannon's portrait of Bishop follows contemporary conventions for portraying upper- and middle-class women, seated in a tastefully simple interior; the distinctive wooden panelling and Louis XV chair appear elsewhere in Shannon's paintings, indicating that Bishop sat for her portrait at Shannon's studio at 8 South Bolton Gardens, London.⁵² Bishop looks up at the viewer with her clear, penetrating gaze, wearing an elaborate black satin tea gown, decorated with pale blue quatrefoil flowers. Shannon's characteristic bravura brushwork details the froth and flounce of Bishop's dress, with its large, puffed sleeves and frothy neckline. Some of the flowers are brought out in some detail, while others are suggested by looser daubs, applied using a square brush technique. Bishop's unthreatening femininity is further emphasized by the spray of pink roses she holds, the college emblem which she had chosen herself (Bingham, *Royal Holloway*, p. 86). After Bishop's portrait was completed, it was unveiled at a ceremony organized by the portrait committee and held in the college Picture Gallery, before being hung in the dining hall.

In 1907 Bishop's successor, Dame Emily Penrose (1858–1942), left Royal Holloway to take up the invitation to become principal of her alma mater, Somerville College, Oxford.⁵³ To celebrate the period that Penrose had been principal, when she had negotiated Royal Holloway's admission as a college of the University of London in 1900, the RHCA commissioned the first of its two portraits by Philip de László. Having only arrived in London that year, de László was beginning to make his name as a successor to John Singer Sargent.⁵⁴ De László's wife, Lucy (née Guinness) was the cousin of Elizabeth Maude Guinness (1868–1960), vice principal, librarian at Royal Holloway, and sitter for Royal Holloway's second portrait by the artist (*Fig. 8*). De László painted Guinness's portrait for less than his usual fee, charging only £100 at a time when a three-quarter length portrait usually cost £700.⁵⁵ Guinness, granddaughter to the founder of the Guinness

⁵¹ *The Exhibition of the Royal Academy, 1897: The One Hundred and Twenty-Ninth* (London: Royal Academy, 1897), p. 2.

⁵² Gallati, p. 9. Shannon's studio later passed to Sir William Orpen. See Christopher Hussey, 'London Houses: Sir William Orpen's Studio, 8, South Bolton Gardens', *Country Life*, 20 September 1930, pp. 342–47 (pp. 344–45).

⁵³ Penrose was principal of Bedford (1893–97), Royal Holloway (1898–1907), and Somerville (1907–26) in turn. See Pauline Adams, 'Penrose, Dame Emily (1858–1942)', *ODNB* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/35466>>.

⁵⁴ Christopher Wood, 'Philip de László in England', and Richard Ormond, 'De László and Sargent', in Sandra de Laszlo with others, *A Brush with Grandeur: Philip de László (1869–1937)* (London: Holberton, 2004), pp. 20–39, 40–49.

⁵⁵ Lucy de László noted in her diary that 'Ellie' Guinness, her relative, paid an honorarium of £100 instead of the usual fee of £700. See *The Diaries of Lucy de László*, ed. by Katherine Field and transcr. by Susan de Laszlo (London: De Laszlo Archive Trust, 2019–), 1: 1890–1913, 201.



Fig. 8: Philip Alexius de László, *Elizabeth Maude Guinness*, 1910, oil on canvas, 101.6 × 76.2 cm, Royal Holloway, University of London, P1600.

Mahon bank, was one of the earliest students of Royal Holloway, where she later joined the teaching staff (Bingham, *Royal Holloway*, pp. 97–98). It seems likely that Guinness recommended de László to the RHCA to undertake the Penrose commission, as the RHCA continued to rely on its networks and connections to elicit advice about appropriate artists. De László's [portrait of Guinness](#) presents a cultivated, charmingly dressed woman, who, as 'a touchstone for Taste' among the college community, would have been trusted with regard to the choice of portrait painter for the Penrose commission.

By contrast, de László's portrait of Emily Penrose is a point of departure, presenting a new type of portrait in his presentation of this

educational visionary.⁵⁶ Penrose was a pioneering leader in the campaign for women's higher education, as well as a classical scholar, the first woman to attain a first in the Greats examination at Oxford. In her distinguished career she became principal of three different women's colleges as well as sitting on administrative boards for the universities of London and Oxford (Adams, 'Penrose'). Her skills as a strategist, administrator, and scholar saw Oxford women awarded their first degrees in 1920.⁵⁷ Her successor Helen Darbishire described her thus: 'unusually tall, in height, build and feature she was in the great style, and she had mind and character to match [...] [standing] head and shoulder above those around her.' However, she was also notoriously shy and awkward, with a lack of small talk that made her a daunting companion for students at the dinner table.⁵⁸ De László seems to have been undaunted, however, employing his famous ability to draw out his sitters through interrogation. He later explained that he saw it as his

task to discover the character of the sitter and transfer it to the canvas. If it does not reflect the real inner spirit, the true person, it is not a good portrait. The physical is nothing. The personality within, which is human and spiritual, everything.⁵⁹

In the resulting portrait, de László presents Penrose as a visionary, gazing into the distance in a manner that recalls depictions of muses or allegorical figures, an appropriate stance for a scholar of Ancient Greek. Classical attire and poses were used by artists to depict the eighteenth-century blue-stocking circle of writers and artists who were associated with Elizabeth Montagu (1718–1800), in works such as Richard Samuel's *Nine Muses of Great Britain* (1778) or Robert Edge Pine's [portrait of Catherine Macaulay](#) (c. 1775). In this portrait Macaulay stands in a Roman setting, perhaps also alluding to her home in Bath, dressed as a Roman matron but wearing a senator's sash across her body as she holds a quill and leans on a pile of books that includes her own *History of England*.⁶⁰ De László would

⁵⁶ Very few paintings of women wearing academic dress predate de László's portrait of Emily Penrose. A notable example is John Singer Sargent's [portrait of Dr Elizabeth Garrett Anderson](#) (1900), currently on loan to the National Portrait Gallery. See Jordanova, *Physicians and Their Images*, pp. 75–76.

⁵⁷ Pauline Adams, *Somerville for Women: An Oxford College 1879–1993* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 76.

⁵⁸ 'Personal Reminiscences of Penrose, Character Sketches, etc.', Emily Penrose Files, Somerville College Archives, Oxford, Penrose File Box 1: 2a.

⁵⁹ Suzanne Bailey, 'De László's Relationships with His Patrons and Sitters', in de Laszlo with others, pp. 50–64 (p. 50).

⁶⁰ For Macaulay, see Bridget Hill, 'Macaulay [née Sawbridge; other married name Graham], Catharine (1731–1791)', *ODNB* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/17344>>. For Pine's portrait of Macaulay, see Lara Perry, *History's Beauties: Women and the National Portrait Gallery, 1856–1900* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 76–77.

have known Pine's portrait of Macaulay, which was given to the National Portrait Gallery in 1904.⁶¹ Yet Penrose's stance is perhaps closer to Sir Joshua Reynolds's *Self-Portrait* (c. 1780), in which Reynolds presents himself as an academic authority, dressed in the doctoral robes associated with the Doctorate of Civil Law conferred on him by the University of Oxford in 1773.⁶² De László's portrait of Penrose shares Reynolds's prominent sleeve that references Rembrandt's self-portraits, his stance with hand on hip, and his three-quarter turn towards the viewer. Reynolds had been thwarted in his attempt to introduce academic robes for Royal Academicians in 1775 and his choice to depict himself in his doctoral robes may have been a reaction to this disagreement with architect Sir William Chambers.⁶³ Whether de László knew this story or not, the connection between the portraits is arresting.

Two known sketches for de László's portrait of Emily Penrose survive. A portrait drawing, belonging to the University Women's Club on long loan to Somerville College, was given by de László to Penrose as a Christmas present. The portrait drawing captures Penrose's face in animation, while an *oil sketch*, now in the Royal Holloway and Bedford New College art collection, plans out the composition's colours, balancing dark and bright blue tones. This sketch once belonged to the head of Royal Holloway's department of music, and later to Dame Marjorie Williamson, who was chair of council and then principal of Royal Holloway (1962–73). It may well have hung in the college when it was in the possession of either of these women. De László employed a similar palette in his portrait of Guinness, who wears a sombre black dress with highlights of electric blue, complementing Penrose's black and blue hood. As a pendant pair, these portraits present two models of educated women: Penrose the visionary academic, clad in her university gown, and Guinness the cultured intellectual, elegantly and fashionably dressed.

In these portraits Penrose's academic costume and Guinness's lack thereof attest to the complicated situation that still surrounded female students, degrees for women, and academic dress at the end of the nineteenth century. By then, academic dress worn by women had become aspirational. In May 1907, for example, a group of Somerville students requested that

⁶¹ Richard Samuel's *Nine Muses of Great Britain* did not enter the National Portrait Gallery's collection until 1972 (Perry, p. 143).

⁶² A contemporary replica of this portrait was in the collection of the Duke of Rutland and destroyed by fire at Belvoir Castle, 26 October 1816. See David Mannings, *Sir Joshua Reynolds: A Complete Catalogue of His Paintings*, 2 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 1, 51 (no. 21).

⁶³ Reynolds's self-portrait was intended as a pendant to a portrait of Sir William Chambers at Somerset House, and was as such a real jibe at Chambers's intervention in Reynolds's attempt to introduce official academic robes at the RA. See Derek Hudson, *Sir Joshua Reynolds: A Personal Study* (London: Bles, 1958), pp. 125–26.

the principal and members of staff who were entitled to wear academic dress should do so at Sunday prayers (Adams, *Somerville*, p. 76). Yet many of the women who had attained the most prestigious results in university examinations, such as Millicent Fawcett's daughter Philippa, who was ranked above the Senior Wrangler in the 1890 Cambridge Mathematics Tripos, were not permitted to wear academic robes of their alma mater (Rubinstein, p. 106). Royal Holloway students could receive degrees from the University of London, which had opened degrees to women in 1878, but many Royal Holloway students, including Guinness, elected to take the examinations set by Oxford, which, like Cambridge, did not recognize women as graduates. Penrose herself had not received a degree from Oxford, nor permission to wear the distinctive black hood lined with crimson worn by Oxford graduates. However, when Trinity College Dublin opened its degrees to women in 1904, it also opened its graduation ceremonies to women who had completed courses at the Oxbridge colleges. Between 1904 and 1907, 720 women travelled to Dublin by steamboat to attend graduation ceremonies and receive their black hood lined with blue, before Trinity College revised its policy after being overwhelmed by the numbers of these so-called 'steamboat ladies'.⁶⁴ De László, who liked his sitters to wear the garb of their rank, painted Penrose wearing the hood and gown of the 'steamboat ladies', a costume that denotes Penrose's status as a graduate, if not as a graduate of Oxford (Suzanne Bailey, p. 52). After Oxford opened its degrees to women in 1920, largely thanks to Penrose, she received her degree and gown at the first ceremony to include female graduates (Adams, *Somerville*, pp. 70–77).

De László's portrait of Emily Penrose is the first of many commissions he received to paint pioneering professional women wearing the academic robes they had earned through their degrees. Some of these women, such as Frances Ralph Grey (d.1935), high mistress of St Paul's Girls' School (1903–27), also wear the distinctive, blue-lined hood of Trinity College Dublin. Others wear gowns that celebrate their particular degrees, such as Dame Bertha Phillpotts (1877–1932), principal of Westfield College (1919–21); Dame Helen Gwynne-Vaughan (1879–1967), the first female professor at Birkbeck College; and Dr Agnes Maude Royden (1876–1956), a preacher and campaigner for the ordination of women, and one of the first women to receive a PhD. In 1921 de László also painted Henrietta Jex-Blake (1862–1953), principal of Lady Margaret Hall (1909–21), to celebrate the receipt, with Penrose, of her degree at the first Oxford graduation ceremony to include women (*Fig. 9*). Like de László's earlier portrait of Emily Penrose, these works draw on earlier portraiture traditions to present women wearing academic dress in a distinctly feminine manner. Like Penrose, these

⁶⁴ S. M. Parkes, 'Steamboat Ladies (act. 1904–07)', *ODNB* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/61643>>.



Fig. 9: Philip Alexius de László, *Henrietta Jex-Blake, Principal (1909–1921)*, 1921, oil on canvas, 90 × 69.5 cm, Lady Margaret Hall, University of Oxford, PCF24.

sitters wear their university hoods askew across the upper body like a sash or the drapery of neoclassical dress, but if anything they are more feminine in appearance than the statuesque, standing Penrose, recalling more closely the bust [portrait](#) of Enlightenment intellectual Elizabeth Carter (1717–1806), painted by Catherine Reade in 1765.⁶⁵ Clad in the costume of a Roman matron and holding a book and quill, Reade presented Carter as a learned woman who combined intellect and modesty. By employing university hoods as classical drapery, particularly in his portrait of Jex-Blake,

⁶⁵ This portrait, painted for Elizabeth Montagu, Carter's friend and fellow member of the 'Bluestockings', was bequeathed by Mrs Louie Pennington-Bickford and presented by Roland Brown to Johnson House in 1941. For Elizabeth Carter, see Judith Hawley, 'Carter, Elizabeth (1717–1806)', *ODNB* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/4782>>.

de László developed a new convention of portraiture that resolved some of the difficulties presented in depicting women wearing academic gowns over feminine dress, through the utilization of conventions used to depict earlier women intellectuals. The proliferation of these portraits by de László suggests that the artist gained a certain reputation among the networks commissioning them.

De László's portraits of these women had a significant effect on the kinds of portraits commissioned for women's colleges henceforth. In 1925 the RHCA commissioned Sir William Orpen (1878–1931) to paint Penrose's successor, Ellen Charlotte Higgins (1871–1951), known as 'the Chief' to her students, in celebration of her twentieth year as principal (*Fig. 10*).⁶⁶ A diagram in a letter from Orpen inquiring about the direction of the light in the portrait's intended location suggests that he was expecting to paint a head-and-shoulders portrait of a conventionally dressed woman.⁶⁷ The finished painting is rather different: a three-quarter length portrait, which, at just over a metre wide, presented Higgins on the same near-lifelike scale as Shannon's portrait of Bishop and de László's of Penrose.⁶⁸ Standing erect holding her mortar board in a stance that evokes military or royal portraits, such as Anthony Van Dyck's much copied 1636 state portrait of Charles I, Higgins wears her academic gown and hood over one of her famously masculine outfits.⁶⁹ Orpen preferred to paint his subjects seated, and went out of his way to persuade them that sitting conveyed 'a much finer effect' — provided they could sit still.⁷⁰ Higgins's stance is unusual, and was almost certainly an element of that portrait she insisted upon herself, knowingly or unknowingly alluding to de László's portrait of Penrose, Reynolds's self-portrait, Van Dyck's [portrait](#) of Charles I, and more. In this way artist and sitter forged a new kind of portraiture together, drawing on existing

⁶⁶ Meeting of the portrait committee, 2 November 1925, Principal's Portrait Committee Minute Book, 1925–26, RHUL Archives, RHC AS/915/1. References to 'the Chief' are scattered throughout students' correspondence (Bingham, *Royal Holloway*, p. 115).

⁶⁷ Letter from William Orpen to Miss Locker, 3 November 1925, Principal's Portrait Committee Minute Book, 1925–26, RHUL Archives, RHC AS/915/1.

⁶⁸ Orpen's portrait of Higgins shares its dimensions (125.7 × 101.6 cm) with Shannon's portrait of Bishop. De László's portrait of Penrose is slightly smaller (116.8 × 91.5 cm).

⁶⁹ Anthony Van Dyck's portrait of Charles I (signed and dated 1636) is in the Royal Collection. Margaret Fitzgerald Richey, reader in German, ribbed Higgins affectionately in a comic poem, describing her as the 'Scottish Chief of manly mien', who did not 'change the fashion of her dress, and never will'. See Margaret Fitzgerald Richey, *College Causeries* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1949), p. 33.

⁷⁰ Martin H. Donohoe, 'Sir Wm. Orpen and Lord Leverhulme. Presentation Portrait at "Half Rate". 3,000 guineas v. 1,500. Interview with the Painter', clipping in Bruce Arnold biography files, Sir William Orpen Archive, ESB Centre for the Study of Irish Art, National Gallery of Ireland.



Fig. 10: William Orpen, *Miss Ellen Charlotte Higgins*, 1926, oil on canvas, 125.7 × 101.6 cm, Royal Holloway, University of London, P1610.

conventions and inventing new ones. In these new portraits of new women, academic robes, worn and painted, become agents of a new kind of female authority.

At Royal Holloway some of these newly commissioned portraits hung in the dining hall, where these paintings of college principals and founders would look down on students and staff as they dined. The college was famous for its opulent dining rituals, during which the staff and students would process into hall wearing evening dress (Robinson, p. 113). Orpen's portrait of Higgins was intended for the dining hall, as his questions about the room's lighting indicate. However, Philip de László's portraits of Emily Penrose and Elizabeth Guinness were for some time hung in Royal Holloway's Picture Gallery, alongside the college's outstanding collection of Victorian paintings. De László visited them there on Sunday, 4 December 1932, just days after he had unveiled his portrait of Dr Maude

Royden.⁷¹ This decision was probably taken by Carey, keeper of the Picture Gallery. The founding collection mainly comprised genre paintings, historical subjects, and landscapes, with only two portraits, of Thomas Holloway and his wife Jane (Chapel, *Victorian Taste*). The de László portraits would have stood out, but their presence in the gallery would have allowed visitors to view these works alongside those by Turner, Gainsborough, and Constable, among others. This decision to hang de László's portraits in the Picture Gallery instead of the dining hall again reminds us of the porous boundaries between 'public' and 'private' spaces within these early women's colleges, already examined in the discussion of pictures hanging in the different spaces at Newnham. The function of portraits depends at least partly on their place and positioning within these colleges, where they could be read as likenesses, symbols of history, or works of art depending on their spatial context.

Conclusion

The example of Royal Holloway underlines the dual purpose of art collections at early women's colleges. Portraits collected by and commissioned for these colleges were at once private art collections, intended for the edification of staff and students, but also public ones, seen by visitors of all kinds. The colleges discussed here — Newnham, Bedford, and Royal Holloway — varied hugely in their financial circumstances and foundations, as well as in the aims and ambitions of their leaders, teaching staff, and governing boards. However, their portraits, while condoned by college leaders and hung in the college buildings, were paid for by networks of women who had studied or taught there. The history they present, through the personalities that shaped certain phases in college life, gives some insight into the self-fashioning of the student, staff, and alumnae bodies, as well as of the sitters themselves. Alumnae associations and old student bodies have been rather overlooked as groups of female collectors, perhaps as their collective nature belies common narratives of heroic collectors acting alone. Yet these pioneering women were certainly using art collections as a means to commemorate beloved figures, record college history, and present a public face to college visitors, whether that face was academic, polymathic, conservative, or progressive.

⁷¹ De László noticed that the portrait of Penrose was suffering from cracking and suggested that both this and that of Guinness should be varnished. Letters between Ulrich R. Dolling and Charles William Carey, the college curator, December 1932, RHUL Archives, RHC AR/500/235/1–2.