

CHAPTER 5



Mary Bateson (1865–1906)

Scholar and Suffragist

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THIS VOLUME, *Women Medievalists and the Academy*, celebrates the achievements and frustrations of the first generations of women to engage in professional medieval studies. The collection allows women working in the academy today to be aware of our foremothers and to learn from their examples, their successes, and their mistakes. Historian Mary Bateson, scholar and suffragist, lived one hundred years ago, on the cusp of the opportunity for academic professionalization for women. Her life illustrates an inspiring blend of serious scholarship, accessible publication, and devoted political activism. Her achievements can remind twenty-first-century women medievalists in the academy of the occasional necessity to move our work out of the enclosed enclaves of the university library and the professional conference and into the more immediate spheres of politics and popular publication.

Information about Mary Bateson's childhood must be inferred from the history of her family. Her father and mother married in 1857, the same year that William Henry Bateson became the Master of Saint John's College, Cambridge.¹ We can assume that Mary Bateson spent most of the first sixteen years of her life residing at the elegant and spacious Master's Lodge at Saint John's College, Cambridge. She attended the Misses Thornton's School in Cambridge in the mid-1870s before spending some time at the Institut Friedlaender in Baden, Germany.² Her command of German was substantial enough that she was engaged as the German teacher at the Perse School for Girls at the same time she was a student there.³ Her father had been on the original board of the Perse School for Girls, which opened in January 1881, when Mary Bateson was fifteen. Her father, who is described in the *Dictionary of National Biography* as a "remarkably sweet and tender character," died in 1881; the family then moved



to a house on Harvey Road in Cambridge.⁴ She studied at Perse from 1881 to 1884, presumably preparing to enter Newnham College, Cambridge, an institution with which her family was deeply involved.

When William Henry Bateson became master of Saint John's in 1857, there was no place for women in the world of Cambridge academics. By 1871 Newnham had formally opened, thanks to the efforts of a variety of proponents of women's higher education, including Mary Bateson's parents. Girton College opened for women during this period as well, but students at both colleges were not officially recognized members of Cambridge University. From 1871 to 1921 women at Newnham and Girton were issued "certificates" stating that they had passed the tripos rather than official degrees. Mary Bateson, for all her scholarly achievement, was not actually Mary Bateson, B.A. or M.A. or Ph.D.—she is always and only "Miss Mary Bateson." Newnham and Girton were not officially recognized as full member colleges of Cambridge University until 1948.⁵

Because of her parents' continuing involvement with the college's early history, Mary Bateson must have been intimately acquainted with the staff, the buildings, and many of the students at Newnham and in the university at large even before she entered the college in the fall of 1884. It was probably assumed throughout her childhood (she was six when Newnham opened) that she would attend.

The Newnham College that Bateson entered in 1884 was, then, full of her family's energy, goodwill, and money. Bateson lived at home during her first year as a Newnham student. There were forty-five students in her year, including Clara Skeat (daughter of noted medievalist W. W. Skeat) and Blanche Athena Clough (niece to the principal and a future lecturer and vice principal). Bateson's older sister, Anna, attended Newnham as well during these years, and Mary and Anna both lived in South Hall in the academic year 1885–86. Bateson returned to South Hall for the 1886–87 year, when she took a first class in the history tripos and was the secretary of the Newnham debating society.⁶ Her undergraduate dissertation, "Monastic Civilisation in the Fens," won the Historical Essay Prize in 1887.⁷ Bateson seems to have been involved with the debating society throughout her undergraduate career, and it was perhaps here that some of her initial engagement with the suffragette suffrage movement occurred. She met Dr. Mandell Creighton during these years, if she had not met him before; he became her academic mentor as she began to pursue serious historical scholarship.

Bateson's first-class history tripos did not end her academic affiliation with Newnham, an affiliation that would endure for the rest of her life. Traditionally, this would have been the time for Bateson, an upper-class educated woman, to marry; she did not. No historical documents (that I have been able to find) allude to any reason for Bateson's single status; whether she consciously chose not to marry or never had the opportunity to do so remains a mystery. Since she was a woman, there were no options for formal graduate study available; Bateson had to continue her education on her own, using her connections within the Cambridge University academic community

to study manuscripts, write articles, edit texts, and produce both popular and scholarly publications.

From 1887 to 1893 she began to investigate medieval culture in earnest, with Creighton's informal guidance. His letters to her encourage specific topics of inquiry and praise her ongoing efforts.⁸ Creighton, the Dixie Professor of Ecclesiastical History, envisioned that Bateson's career would be focused on monastic and ecclesiastical history (as his was). Creighton was also the founding editor of the *English Historical Review*, and in 1890 the *Review* published her first two, brief scholarly editions. Bateson's relationship with the *Review* endured for the rest of her life, and in it she published an article or short edited text almost every year from 1890 to 1906.

Bateson's relationship with the *Dictionary of National Biography* began in this period as well. To the original edition, published from 1885 to 1900, she contributed 108 biographical articles.⁹ The subjects of all these are men; they include saints, monks, and noblemen. Some date to the Anglo-Saxon or early-modern periods; most cluster in the Anglo-Norman and High Middle Ages. Bateson wrote on no women for the *Dictionary*; she herself was included as a subject after her death.

During this period Bateson also refined her command of languages necessary for a serious medievalist. Newnham historian Alice Gardner's memorial to Bateson indicates that Bateson was a hard worker and dogged learner. Gardner remarks that Bateson's command of Latin was not strong when she entered Newnham; Bateson also worked hard on her own prose, refining her writing and laboring over each sentence to make it exactly right.¹⁰ While Gardner's description provides a window into a late-nineteenth-century version of the writing process, it also shows that Bateson engaged in substantial foundational study. Her 1890 *English Historical Review* articles provide scholarly editions of early Modern English texts; within the following ten years Bateson would publish editions of Middle English, Old French, and Latin texts.

By 1892 her command of Latin was firm enough for her to produce the enormously important *editio princeps* of Ælfric's *Letter to the Monks of Eynsham*; it appeared as a rarely cataloged appendix in G. W. Kitchin's *Compotus Rolls*. Despite its obscurity, it remained the only available edition of this key Benedictine Reform document until 1984.

It is not clear whether Bateson taught at Newnham during these years, although she did remain an active member of the debating society (an 8 December 1889 letter from Newnham student Catherine Durning Holt to her mother mentions that Bateson spoke "exceedingly well" at a recent debate night).¹¹ The *Dictionary of National Biography* states that she began teaching immediately after her tripos. However, the *Newnham College Register* lists her as an "Associate and Fellow" of the college from 1893 to 1906, so perhaps her teaching career began as late as 1893. The early lecture lists for the college are organized by student and residence hall rather than by lecturer, but Bateson does not seem to be listed from 1887 to 1893. In the six years between her tripos exams and the documented beginning of her teaching career, Bateson may have done some teaching; she read widely, corresponded with professors and scholars

in her community, worked on her languages, and produced her first scholarly publications—in short, she unofficially completed a graduate education.

Mary Bateson did not spend her life in a library. Much of her life, like that of any upper-class English woman, was spent in society. Bateson's social life revolved around the academic world of Cambridge, of course, and she is remembered in all her obituaries as a gracious, compassionate woman with a sense of humor and a keen intellect. Gardner even remarks that any party was sure to be successful if Mary Bateson was on the guest list, and she mentions Bateson's "unexpected sallies of wit" at college meetings.¹² Thomas Frederick Tout, a historian and administrator from the University of Manchester, states in an obituary that she "was popular socially in circles that cared little for her personal [academic] distinction" and refers to her "rare sense of humor . . . her deep, hearty laugh . . . [her] downright breezy good-fellowship."¹³ Ellen A. McArthur recalls her as "absolutely honest, independent, and fearless, full of commonsense, and endowed with a sense of humor."¹⁴

Sometime between her tripos and her death, Bateson made the unusual step of moving out of her mother's house and into a home of her own. In her obituary in the *Manchester Guardian*, Tout notes that she "lived contentedly in her little house in the Huntington Road."¹⁵ Since her mother's address at the time of Mary Bateson's death is at Oxford and Cambridge Mansions, it is clear that Bateson lived alone in the Huntington Road house. It seems Bateson valued her peace and quiet over the social convention of the adult, unmarried daughter living with her parents.

The years from 1893 to 1898 mark the beginning of her documented teaching career as well as the growth of her scholarly production. Her scholarly mentor Mandell Creighton had become bishop of Peterborough in 1891.¹⁶ Bateson turned for guidance to F. W. Maitland, who was appointed Downing Professor of the Laws of England in 1888.¹⁷ Founder of the Selden Society for the study of the history of English law, Maitland encouraged Bateson's turn from ecclesiastical to municipal subjects in the bulk of her work. By 1898 it was clear that Bateson's academic energies would be directed toward boroughs and towns, not monasteries and cathedrals.

Bateson never assumed the obligations of a full-time lecturer for the college. She did not live at Newnham after 1887 (most of the staff was in residence), and she only once gave more than one series of lectures in any term (in contrast Gardner gave two or three lecture series each term). Eleanor Balfour Sidgwick, in the Newnham principal's report for 1907, described Bateson's position not "as one of the regular teaching staff, but as a constant and valued teacher in her special field."¹⁸ Sidgwick also celebrates Bateson's service on the college council during these years. Gardner remarks that Bateson's "great task in the college was to produce a noble discontent"—that Bateson never allowed Newnham's staff and students to "rest on [their] oars, to be satisfied if [they] produced good tripos results or merely came up to an ordinary college standard."¹⁹ Bateson's quest for academic excellence in her individual work was considered an inspiration for the rest of the Newnham community.

During this period Bateson lectured on English constitutional history, but Tout

remarks that “she could never interest herself very profoundly in the work of preparing pupils for examinations, especially for examinations over which she had no control.”²⁰ This dissatisfaction Bateson felt at the college’s second-class status is indicated as well by her leadership in Newnham’s ultimately unsuccessful 1895 petition to the university to grant formal degrees (instead of “certificates”) to women.

The years 1898–1905 mark the pinnacle of her prolific and brief career. She continued to teach her sole English constitutional history course at Newnham, sometimes for all three terms of an academic year, more often for just one or two. Bateson’s scholarship flourished in this period, during which she was a vocal supporter of research fellowships for women. Since she was financially independent, she was not agitating for her own ends. She firmly believed, twenty-five years before Virginia Woolf addressed the faculty and students of Newnham College about the necessity of “a room of one’s own,” that women could not pursue serious scholarship without the financial and professional support of an academic institution.

Sidgwick, the second principal of Newnham, credits Bateson as the prime mover behind the foundation of the Newnham Research Fellowships.²¹ Bateson was awarded one of the first of these in 1903 from a fund to which she had contributed £250. Upon the expiration of her fellowship, she gave the money back to the fund to be used by someone who needed it more.²² Bateson, it seems, was interested more in the academic prestige and access associated with a research fellowship than in the financial assistance it provided. Many of the title pages of her later books term her “Associate and Fellow of Newnham College” rather than “Associate and Lecturer of Newnham College.”

In this seven-year span she produced thirteen book-length scholarly textual editions (two in collaboration with other scholars), five short editions in the *English Historical Review*, three journal articles (two of which were enormously important in their fields), two annual bibliographies of English and Irish history, thirteen extensive encyclopedia articles, and one popular history book. Her reputation was such that she was asked to be the prestigious Warburton Lecturer at the University of Manchester in 1905; her two guest lectures were titled “Survivals of Ancient Customs in English Borough Law.”²³

Perhaps because it was somehow considered a more “feminine” scholarly occupation to edit texts than to produce monographs, the bulk of Bateson’s work exists in the form of scholarly textual editions. Bateson had access to the extensive manuscript collections at the colleges of Cambridge University; the librarian at the central University Library also held manuscripts for her on loan from other libraries and depositories. Her final and probably most important editorial work was the mammoth two-volume *Borough Customs*, which brought together tenth- through seventeenth-century texts such as charters, law codes, customals, letters patent, patent rolls, council orders, and ordinance rolls to “set out the rules which obtained in the borough-moots.” One memorial to her notes that her “introductions are models of lucid and orderly statement.”²⁴

Two of Bateson's journal articles are still cited with frequency in their fields as seminal, originary analyses. Her 1899 essay, "Origin and History of Double Monasteries," is a foundational text in the history of women's religious communities, establishing a history and a precedent for "double monasteries," houses for monks and nuns ruled by an abbess, usually of royal birth. Her other important article, "The Laws of Breteuil," illustrates that the Norman town of Breteuil, not the English town of Bristol (as was previously believed), is the origin of many English borough laws and customs. Bateson adopts a wry tone in the beginning of the essay, noting that many of her English readers will not like to hear that some of their customs have a French origin.

During the same period that Bateson was producing traditional editions and bibliographies as well as revolutionary historical scholarship, she was also writing substantial amounts of popular history. The years 1903 and 1904 marked the publication of the bulk of Bateson's popular history contributions, in which she showed that she could present history in an engaging and informal manner that still retained her dedication to primary sources and nontraditional modes of analysis. Her contributions include the chapter titled "The French in America" in the 1903 edition of the *Cambridge Modern History; Mediaeval England*, which appeared in the popular Unwin history series *The Story of the Nations*; the chapter on "The Borough of Peterborough" for the *Victoria County History of Northampton*; and eleven essays titled "Social Life" throughout H. D. Traill's monumental five-volume historical encyclopedia, *Social England*. The most notable feature of her popular history writing is her constant use of primary-source quotations and anecdotes to bring the past directly in front of her reader. It is a testament to Bateson's skills as a writer for the general public that she was asked by Cambridge University Press to act as a general editor of the next edition of the *Cambridge Medieval History*, a post that she was unable to assume before her untimely death at the age of forty-one.²⁵

Mary Bateson the historian was also Mary Bateson the suffragist and women's rights crusader, despite the disapproval of some of her Cambridge colleagues. On 4 August 1888 Creighton sent Bateson a letter discouraging her from suffragist and political activity.²⁶ Although some of Bateson's memorials indicate that she followed that advice, she actually remained an active suffragist throughout her life.²⁷

Bateson's family was as involved in women's suffrage as it was in women's education. In 1884 her mother, Anne Bateson, was a founding member of the Cambridge Women's Suffrage Association (CWSA), of which all her daughters were to be members at one time or another; Mary's older sister, Anna, was a founding member of CWSA as well. Mary's sister Margaret Bateson Heitland seems to have been the most radical of the women in the family; after serving as assistant secretary of the CWSA in 1884, she quickly became interested in the economic imperatives of suffrage for working-class women and established herself as a journalist and political writer.²⁸

Mary Bateson, then, lived in a world that was overtly political, activist, and liberal as well as traditionally academic. Her mother and sisters—the core of her family during her adult life—were all active in "the cause," providing time, money, and initiative

to effecting social change. Mary Bateson herself served the CWSA in a variety of capacities throughout the 1880s and 1890s: in a paid position as meeting organizer (1888), and as an executive committee member (1889), secretary of the association (1892–98), secretary to the Special Appeal (1894), and national conference delegate (1896).²⁹ The association seems to have been moderate for a suffrage organization; the CWSA formally affiliated with the moderate National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) rather than the radical Women's Political and Social Union (WPSU) in 1897.³⁰

The pinnacle of Bateson's suffrage career was her speech during a deputation to the prime minister, Henry Campbell-Bannerman, on 19 May 1906. She represented women graduates of universities in a group of 350 representatives from twenty-five different NUWSS affiliates. Bateson spoke last (of the ten women who spoke), presenting to the prime minister a petition signed by 1,530 women university graduates. The NUWSS pamphlet commemorating the event records Bateson's speech on behalf of these university women, "who believe[d] the disenfranchisement of one sex to be injurious to both, and a national wrong in a country which pretend[ed] to be governed on a representative system."³¹

In the body of her speech Bateson refers to the accomplishments of women university graduates, women who are "professors or lecturers . . . [teachers] in secondary schools and primary schools . . . surgeons and physicians . . . who pursue scientific inquiry . . . who are in Civil Service . . . [who are] engaged in literary or political or social work."³² She adroitly lists these accomplishments, augmented by the names of distinguished universities and respected professional societies, before pointing out the absurdity that these women cannot vote. This public declaration combined Bateson's academic and political lives; she argued for a relationship between academic inquiry and political activity that still makes sense one hundred years later.

Mary Bateson's death, after a nine-day illness at the age of forty-one, shocked all the communities of which she was a part. She left her library and all her financial resources (about twenty-five hundred pounds) to Newnham. Obituaries appeared in the *Times*, the *Queen*, the *Manchester Guardian*, the *Athenaeum*, and the *English Historical Review*.³³ She was included in the *DNB* and memorialized in a named research fellowship at her college.³⁴ All the memorials refer to her good nature, her firm work ethic, and her enormous scholarly production. Only the *Queen's* obituary, written by her Girton colleague Ellen A. McArthur, provides any detail about or assigns any substantial worth to Bateson's suffrage activism (the *Queen* was "The Lady's Newspaper," and thus it makes unfortunate sense that this should be the only publication to valorize Bateson's political work).³⁵

Bateson's life illustrates two important blends: that of academic and popular publication and that of historical research and political activism. It reminds us of the near impossibility of combining professional work with family life one hundred years ago. A bust of her, sculpted by her sister Edith Bateson, still stands at the old entrance to the Newnham College Library; it presents her, appropriately, reading a book.

NOTES

1. Stephen et al., *Dictionary of National Biography on CD-ROM*, s.v. "William Henry Bateson." Hereafter this edition of the dictionary is cited as *DNB*.
2. *DNB*, s.v. "Mary Bateson."
3. Scott, *Perse School for Girls, Cambridge*.
4. *DNB*, s.v. "William Henry Bateson."
5. Tullberg, *Women of Cambridge*, 1.
6. Newnham College Club, *Newnham College Letter*.
7. *DNB*, s.v. "Mary Bateson."
8. Creighton, *Life and Letters*, 1:394-95, 408-9, 412-413; 2:406-7.
9. Fenwick, *Women and the Dictionary of National Biography*, 112-13.
10. Gardner, "In Memoriam," 37.
11. Holt, *Letters from Newnham College*, 22.
12. Gardner, "In Memoriam," 34.
13. Tout, "Mary Bateson."
14. McArthur, "In Memoriam."
15. Tout, "Mary Bateson," 6.
16. *DNB*, s.v. "Mandell Creighton."
17. *DNB*, s.v. "F. W. Maitland."
18. Sidgwick, "Report of the Principal," 24.
19. Gardner, *Short History*, 96.
20. Tout, "Mary Bateson," 6.
21. Sidgwick, "Report of the Principal," 24.
22. *Ibid.*
23. "Death of Mary Bateson," 33.
24. Poole, "Mary Bateson," 65; Poole is here quoting a personal communication to him from Professor James Tait.
25. Tout, "Mary Bateson," 6.
26. Creighton, *Life and Letters*, 1:408.
27. *DNB*, s.v. "Mary Bateson" (this entry was written by Tout); Gardner, "In Memoriam," 37; Gardner, *Short History*, 97. Both of these authors state that Bateson followed Creighton's advice.
28. Information about the Batesons from Crawford, *Women's Suffrage Movement*, 38-39 and 282.
29. *Ibid.*, 39.
30. *Ibid.*, 91. "Suffragette" is used most commonly to describe the more radical WPSU members; hence, Bateson is more accurately termed a "suffragist."
31. National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, *Women's Suffrage Deputation*, 11.
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Times* (London), 1 December 1906; *Queen*, 8 December 1906; *Manchester Guardian*, 3 December 1906; *English Historical Review* 22 (1907): 64-68; *Athenaeum*, 8 December 1906. Maitland's *Athenaeum* memorial was reprinted in *The Collected Papers of Frederick William Maitland*, ed. H. A. L. Fisher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), 3:541-43.
34. The Mary Bateson Memorial Research Fellowship was endowed with £794 in 1909 (*Record of the Benefactors*); the minutes of the meeting that led to the establishment of the fellowship are extant in the Newnham archives.
35. McArthur, "In Memoriam," 1033.

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