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## 'Fors Clavigera', the Young Women of Whitelands College, and the Temptations of Social History

By Christopher Bischof

On the first of May each year from the 1880s onward the young women at Whitelands teacher training college in London celebrated by throwing to the wind the timetable that normally dictated how their every moment would be spent. Instead, they adorned the college in flowers, donned in white dresses, and spent the day dancing, singing, and reading poetry. The tradition of May Day helped to poke a hole in the rather dour institutional regimen of Whitelands, which opened the way for many smaller, everyday acts that gradually reworked the ethos of the college.



The women of Whitelands on May Day, c. 1923. Whitelands Archive: Student Albums and Memorabilia, Box N-P.

Whitelands sanctioned these May Day activities at the suggestion of John Ruskin, the famous author and social thinker, who was a patron of the college. Ruskin sought to revive May Day as part of his campaign to overcome the effects of industrialization on social relations and culture by returning to the perceived organicism of medieval traditions.

In the afternoon, the young women elected a May Queen, who handed out copies of Ruskin's books to her fellow students. Ruskin himself donated copies of all his books that he had on hand - all except for *Fors Clavigera*, his famous book of letters to working men encouraging them to radically reimagine society, which he declared was "not meant for girls." The women of Whitelands, however, secretly acquired and distributed *Fors* along with the rest of his works.[1] This was part of a remarkably widespread and passionate culture of intellectual curiosity at Victorian training colleges.[2]

What is even more remarkable is that the young women of Whitelands not only acquired, read, and probably discussed *Fors Clavigera*, they actually helped to make its index - unbeknownst to Ruskin himself. Ruskin had asked John Faunthorpe, the principal of Whitelands and one of his intellectual protégés, for assistance compiling an index for *Fors*, which was to be published separately. Faunthorpe shouldered most of the work himself, but at several key points he enlisted the help of his wife and the young women at Whitelands. At one point he had twenty-six

Whitelands women, one for every letter of the alphabet, assembled in a room scanning *Fors*. "This took me about two years of leisure time," Faunthorpe recorded later in his never-published autobiography, "and without my wife's and my college girls' help it would have taken me much longer."

Though built on the backs of the young women of Whittelands, the index of *Fors* also cemented the budding friendship and intellectual relationship between Ruskin and Faunthorpe. "I am really aghast to-day at learning the toil that index has cost you," a grateful Ruskin wrote Faunthorpe in February of 1886. *Fors*, Ruskin believed, "will be thrice the book" once it had a "well done" index. In fact, the index inspired him to a new project: "I think with the help of this index of writing a systematic commentary on *Fors* and you to be partner in profits." Faunthorpe counseled Ruskin against this project, arguing that the nature of *Fors* did not lend itself to a commentary. Ruskin heeded this counsel, marking a shift in their relationship. Before Ruskin had been mentor to Faunthorpe. Now Ruskin took advice as well as gave it. The work which it appeared Faunthorpe had heroically and single-handedly put into indexing *Fors* - and the mastery of the text that work implied - helped to bring about this shift.[3]

This is another chapter in the hidden contribution of women to intellectual work, much like the contribution of women to some of the nineteenth century's great works of history as revealed by Bonnie Smith.[4] What makes this story particularly interesting is that the contribution of women was hidden even from Ruskin himself, who would have been aghast at this violation of the gendered sensibilities which he held so dear.

It also reveals the challenges of doing social history, especially in the context of the history of education. For historians of education working on the nineteenth century or earlier, recovering the story of teachers, pupils, parents, and other on-the-ground actors is a major struggle. We still know remarkably little about what actually went on in the Victorian classroom, a lacunae that owes largely to the lack of sources. To compensate for this gap in our understanding, it is tempting to lean heavily on the histories of ideas or people we do know well - and who are well known to contemporary readers.

Figures like Ruskin can grab a reader who might otherwise flounder on the unfamiliar terrain of a narrative dominated by unknown teachers and pupils. They also shaped teachers' way of seeing the world and, as a narrative device for the historian, they provide an organic link to the larger social, cultural, and political context in which teachers and others operated. Yet they threaten to steal the show from on-the-ground actors like the teachers-in-training at Whitelands. Writing a social history of education that connects up to big issues like gender, intellectual work, and ideas about the nature of institutions requires walking a fine line.

## References

- [1] Whitelands Archive (WA): *The Whitelands Annual*, 14 (1895), 31-38.
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- [4] Bonnie Smith, *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).