



DISTANT THUNDER

Beauty and Brains

Geologist and science writer Nina Morgan recalls the early attitudes towards female geologists

Many pioneering geologists depended on the encouragement and practical help of their wives and sisters to allow them to carry out their scientific investigations. In those early days, a number of women made important contributions to geological research on their own account. But, as the accomplished female palaeontologist Etheldred Benett [1775-1845] lamented in a letter to the English geologist Samuel Woodward [1790-1838] in 1836, 'scientific people in general have a very low opinion of my sex'.

Slow off the mark

Geologists, it seems, were particularly slow to formally recognise women's contributions to science. The Zoological Society of London, founded in 1829 and the Royal Entomological Society, founded in 1833, both admitted women from the word go. But the Geological Society, having begun life in 1807 as a 'little talking Geological Dinner Club', restricted its membership to gentlemen—initially to only those of a certain class—until the early 20th century. It wasn't until March 1919 that a resolution stating "That it is desirable to admit Women as Fellows of the Society" was put forward. This was passed with a majority of 55 to 12 and the first eight women Fellows were elected on 21 May 1919. But the Society

did not elect its first female President, Janet Vida Watson [1923-1985] until 1982.

The Geologists' Association (GA), established in 1858 as an Association of Amateur Geologists, took a more liberal attitude and accepted women right from its start. Its Association Rule III (1858) reads: 'Ladies shall be eligible for election as members of the Association'.

But in spite of these fine words, more than 20 years after its founding, women were not considered entirely as equals in the modern sense. In his address at the Opening of the Session, 1880-81, Professor T. Rupert Jones [1819-1911] noted that:

"In one aspect particularly it is well that women should know Geology, for thereby they are enabled to sympathise with, and to understand man's work in this interesting and not always easy line of Scientific work and thought. One link the stronger between educated man and woman!"

Sign of the times

Sad to say, comments like this—however well meaning—demonstrate how little attitudes towards female geologists had changed since the beginning of the 19th century. In a letter dated March 16 1835 sent to William Buckland [1784-1856], reader in Geology at Oxford University, the publisher and author Joseph Cottle [1770-1853] detailed an 'amusing' anecdote about a caller who "brought his Wife with him, a portly Lady, who is no doubt consummately skilled in the profound science of Preserves &c". On

being shown the bones of tigers, hyaenas and wolves, the wife apparently remarked "I can't think, Mr Cottle, all these things are half so pretty as shells!"

I am glad, concluded Cottle, "[that] you & Cuvier were not present. It would be worth an Oxford discussion to determine how many years it would take to make a Lady a Geologist."

Fear of flirtation

What lay behind this condescending attitude towards women amongst geologists? One reason, revealed in a letter from the then Geological Survey geologist and later Director, Jethro Teall [1849-1924], to Charles Lapworth [1842-1920], a graptolite expert and pioneer of faunal analysis, was fear of flirtation.

Writing in March 1889 to describe a discussion about whether women should be allowed to attend Geological Society lectures, Teall reported:

"We had some fun yesterday, but were beaten on all points. Ladies excluded by only three or four votes.

The anti-lady party had no arguments. Evans thought that the admission of young ladies might take off the interest of some fellows – lower the tone of the Society &c. In reply to this Hinde made the greatest point of the evening – he should object as much as Evans to anything tending to convert the G.S. into a Flirtation Society – but there was no danger – 'we are not attractive enough'.

A Gorilla-faced person got up and in the most solemn tones implored the fellows to pause before taking such an important step.

'Why', said he, 'the proposal is absolutely revolutionary'. This was too much for us and we absolutely roared. The person's face was a sight to see."

It's nice to know that at least some of the gentlemen of the Geological Society appreciated that beauty and brains are not mutually exclusive.

End notes: Acknowledgments and sources listed online

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