

strengths lay in her ability to use her own experience to comment on her period. Brittain knew herself to be representative of the group of educated middle-class women who brought to fruition the goals of Victorian bourgeois feminism in the years following the First World War and for that reason, her life and work epitomize significant changes in the circumstances of such women in the post-Edwardian years. Nowhere is that fact more evident than in her published and unpublished commentary on Somerville.<sup>4</sup>

Vera Brittain went to Somerville at a time when it was still unusual for middle-class daughters to make such a choice, but when the pioneering phase of the struggle for women's higher education had ended. By the second decade of the twentieth century the women's colleges at Oxford and Cambridge were institutions; young and struggling to be sure, but institutions nonetheless. Using Vera Brittain's experience as a starting point, I speculate in this paper on how the women's colleges at Oxford and Cambridge had changed, from the founding of Girton to the post-Edwardian period.

The founders were a brave and determined group. It took courage and persistence to challenge a male establishment which resented the very idea that women might invade their exclusive masculine preserve. The founders' successors brought energy and intelligence to the task of creating enduring institutions out of the original reformist vision. But as this paper will indicate, Vera Brittain's experiences at Somerville suggest that sadly, in the transition from fragile experiment to the solid success manifested materially in college buildings and culturally in the forging of educational and social traditions, there were losses as well as gains. As the women's colleges matured, administrators, dons, and students contended not only with constraints imposed from without but also with those from within. The great majority of the women involved were from conventional upper-middle-class backgrounds and there were limits to their inner capacities for resistance to long-established patterns of male dominance and appropriate feminine behaviour. There were limits as well to their capacity to understand the ways in which assumptions about social class both benefited and hampered them. At Somerville during the decades of the teens and twenties, these limits and constraints had an influence on who became a student and with what expectations, on the kind of community the college became, and on the nature of the education it offered.<sup>5</sup>

Vera Brittain, the Somervillian with whom we are especially concerned, was born in 1893, the oldest child and only daughter of Thomas Arthur and Edith Brittain. Arthur was a successful Staffordshire paper manufacturer. The Brittain's style of life was affluent, spacious, and well ordered, but by adolescence Vera found the intellectual atmosphere of her family, and still more, of the Derbyshire spa town of Buxton, where the family lived during her youth, limited and repressive, and in *Testament of Youth* she explains that her wish to go to Oxford sprang from a desire to escape the provinciality of her childhood and the narrowness of the definition of women's role that was part of her milieu. Much of the first third of this famous early twentieth-century autobiography is devoted

to a discussion of the author's struggle to get to Oxford, and in *Testament of Youth*, Brittain draws a picture that could be said to be an archetypal feminist story: she writes of a lone struggle between herself and uncongenial surroundings to attain a goal that was seen as outlandish by her parents and the community. She presents herself as single-handedly fighting not merely prejudice, but her own ignorance, and her lack of appropriate formal education.

In recollecting her pre-war experiences when she wrote *Testament of Youth* in the 1930s, Brittain was largely correct in her assessment of why she wanted to go to Oxford. While she never expressed much awareness of the extent to which her choice of Oxford as an escape route was determined by her family's affluence, she authentically recreates her state of mind in *Testament of Youth*: it was her strong desire for autonomy, her sense of ambition, her genuine, if undeveloped feminism, that led her to select Oxford as her goal, and that gave her the energy to work towards that goal.<sup>6</sup> But achieving that goal was not the lone struggle she depicts. Her parents provided her with good educational preparation and she received both economic and psychological support from her family.<sup>7</sup>

From the critical statements that she makes about her formal education in *Testament of Youth* a reader could easily assume that Vera Brittain had been given an unreformed Victorian girl's education, one designed to produce an idle, decorative young lady. In fact, Vera Brittain received a formal education that prepared her quite well for Oxford, and furthermore, it was through her boarding school that she was first exposed to feminist language and feminist solutions: it was from her teachers at school that she first learned to apply that language to the situation of the upper-middle-class woman. Vera was not as well informed about the procedures for admission, and her mathematical training was not as good as it would have been had she been sent to Cheltenham Ladies' College or attended a less fashionable school, but she was well and carefully educated at St. Monica's School in Surrey. St. Monica's had been founded by Louise Heath Jones (1869-1931), who had herself attended Cheltenham, and then Newnham College, Cambridge.<sup>8</sup> Like so many early university-educated women of talent she entered the profession of teaching girls of the middle and upper classes, founding St. Monica's in 1902. St. Monica's was selected for Vera because her mother's oldest sister, Florence Bervon, was Miss Heath Jones's lifelong friend and partner. St. Monica's was not a traditional girls' private school: Louise Heath Jones was not interested in raising girls to be "ornaments." Like other progressive headmistresses of the late Victorian and Edwardian periods, her attitude towards the upper-middle-class woman's role was a contradictory mixture. She supported advancement for women, but at the same time she supported the older values associated with the Victorian ideal of femininity.

At St. Monica's, Vera was taught to read and write and think. In her final year she not only read and wrote essays on Carlyle and Ruskin, but also on such contemporary thinkers as William Morris and H.G. Wells,<sup>9</sup> and it was through the school, not through her family, nor through her own unaided reading, that she was introduced to feminism.<sup>10</sup> She owed much not only to the training she

received there, but to the enlargement of mind and spirit that the school encouraged. Without this positive school experience, it would have been difficult for her to have prepared herself for Oxford.

Vera left St. Monica's at the age of eighteen in 1912 with aspirations towards independence but no clear perception of how she was to achieve it. Arthur and Edith Brittain themselves had no plans formulated for their daughter, and assumed that she would simply adapt to "provincial young ladyhood."<sup>11</sup> It took Vera almost a year to realize just how much she did not want such a limited life, and it was only gradually that going to college emerged for her and for her family as the best possible solution to her needs. Once the objective had been clearly determined, however, her family assisted her by finding her tutors to help her achieve the necessary proficiency in Latin and mathematics, by paying the tutors, and by providing a supportive atmosphere in which she could study: her mother was especially important in providing encouragement, and an almost inexhaustible interest in the details of her daughter's life, a role she was to fulfil for many years.<sup>12</sup> Along with this support, her own intelligence and ambition prompted her to do the necessary work, and she had achieved not merely admission to Somerville but an Exhibition just on the eve of the outbreak of the First World War.

For an upper-middle-class woman born in 1893, a university education was not the obvious and expected choice that it was for a male of similar social status. Gender was still a barrier, more acutely felt in some cases than in others: Vera Brittain's path to a university education was not as easy as was, for example, that of her friend and fellow Somervillian, Winifred Holtby, whose affluent family planned for her university education,<sup>13</sup> but it was easier than that of another friend, Storm Jameson, whose family while middle class was not affluent, and who went to the University of Leeds on a County Scholarship.<sup>14</sup> And for Winifred Holtby, Vera Brittain, and Storm Jameson, all three of whom were born in the 1890s, attending university was much easier than it had been for the earliest generation of women college students—for example, for Constance Maynard, later founder of Westfield College, who was a student in 1872 at Emily Davies's experiment at Hitchin.<sup>15</sup> By Vera Brittain's generation then, gender had become less of a barrier than it had been. But in early twentieth-century England gender was in any case less of a barrier to a university education than social class, and this was especially true of Oxford and Cambridge which were still almost exclusively the preserves of the middle and upper classes.<sup>16</sup> Before the First World War, the barriers against admission facing a working or even a lower-middle-class woman or man were so formidable that the issue of class exclusivity could simply be ignored by individuals, as it was by Vera Brittain, who had led such a well-insulated upper-middle-class life that as a young girl she simply did not notice how privileged she was. She wished to go to Somerville because she had been influenced by feminism, but her assumption that if she were to seek further education it would be at one of the two "ancient" universities reveals the extent to which she unquestioningly accepted the traditions of her social class.

Feminism, for the young Vera, meant that women should “be the equal and respected companions of men,”<sup>17</sup> but the unspoken qualification was that she wanted not the same opportunities as men in general, but the same privileges as her public schoolboy brother. She wanted more formal education because she had a genuine love of knowledge, but also because she knew that Oxford—along with Cambridge—was the training ground for the powerful.

To a considerable extent the social and economic exclusivity of the institutions could also be ignored by the institutions themselves, and this was one of the limitations of Somerville in particular and of the women’s colleges at Oxford and Cambridge in general even though their very existence had from their founding been associated with the movement within the two old universities to reform and modernize the curriculum and to make the institutions less exclusive. Created to challenge gender discrimination, the women’s colleges battled for a measure of acceptance for women, rather than equality. Their founders had no energy, and perhaps no inclination, to challenge the barriers created by social class. They saw their task as that of ensuring that girls of the upper middle class could achieve access to study at the two universities, and they did not go beyond that mandate.

In October 1914, when Vera Brittain entered, Somerville was thirty-five years old. It had been founded in 1879 as “Somerville Hall” along with Lady Margaret Hall. The small groups who had founded these first two Halls established the Association for the Education of Women, designed to act as a link between the Halls themselves and the University. Of the two, Somerville was just slightly more radical. It had been organized by a group which had broken away from the original founding committee in order to form a non-denominational Hall, whereas Lady Margaret Hall was to be Anglican. But it was still securely respectable and ladylike, and conservative in its relationship to feminism. The Hall accommodated twelve students when it first opened, who lived together, to quote the words of the original prospectus, in an atmosphere like that of an “English family.”<sup>18</sup> Somerville itself grew under its first two Principals, developing from mere residence to genuine college (Somerville Hall became Somerville College in 1894). The numbers of students grew—in 1895 sixty-two students were enrolled<sup>19</sup>—and the College began to take over the teaching of its own students from the aegis of the Association for the Education of Women, and to appoint tutors of its own.

The decisive movement towards modernization and away from the Victorian ideal of learning and ladylike gentility came with the appointment in 1907 of the third principal, Emily Penrose, whom Brittain would later describe as the “first genuine scholar among women principals.” She had herself been a Somerville student, and she was the first woman to receive First Class in the degree examinations in “Greats,” Oxford’s name for classical studies.<sup>20</sup> Building on the work already accomplished by her predecessors, she established and encouraged the development of a highly trained tutorial staff of university women and planned ahead for the admission of women to full degree status.

In short, then, when Vera Brittain went up in 1914 the College's pioneer period was over. The main College buildings had been built, tutors and students had developed a set of traditions, and the institution had a recognized place within the university itself. Women students could attend lectures and take the examinations for degrees, and although full degree status for women was achieved only in 1920,<sup>21</sup> Oxford's women dons believed in 1914 that this victory would come soon.

Brittain's Oxford experience was divided into two parts, her first year (from October 1914 to June 1915), after which she served in the First World War as a Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse, and the period after the war, from 1919 to 1921. Her university career was of course profoundly affected by the First World War, but she experienced the war's influence only gradually. During her first term both she and Somerville itself largely ignored it and while clearly her overall experience would have been different had the war not intervened, her initial responses to Somerville were much the same as they would have been had there been no war, and even though she herself was to write of her later years at Oxford that "it was not the same Oxford and I was not the same student,"<sup>22</sup> in fact there was considerable continuity between her first and second periods as a student.

Vera Brittain was part of an entering class of thirty-five students. Their average age was nineteen, making Vera at twenty just a little older than the average. The class contained four Scholarship students, and four Exhibitioners, so that Vera as one of the Exhibitioners was marked out as a potentially strong student. In social class they ranged from the daughters of army or navy officers or clergymen who had educated their daughters at Cheltenham Ladies' College (four of the entering class had gone to Cheltenham, making it the most well-represented school, followed by the North London Collegiate with three) to the girl who was the Clothworkers' scholar and who had attended a Church of England elementary school, but they were overwhelmingly an upper-middle-class group.<sup>23</sup>

The fees were £35 a term, which included board, lodging, and tuition, with some smaller rooms at £31 or £28 "reserved for students who submit satisfactory evidence that they cannot pay the full fee."<sup>24</sup> This was a considerable sum in 1914, when the average annual wage of an adult male industrial worker was £75, and that of a male salaried worker was £340.<sup>25</sup>

Of the many aspects of Somerville life that can be viewed through the prism of Vera Brittain's experience in 1914-15 and again in 1919-21, I will focus first on the nature of Somerville as a woman's community, and then on the content of its curriculum. As Martha Vicinus has pointed out, the early women's colleges were, among other things, communities of women. They formed, she says, "an important alternative to the traditional family for single women" and "offered a unique opportunity for intellectual women to join others who shared their delight in study."<sup>26</sup>

Women create all-women communities for a variety of reasons. Women can seek each other out as a way of affirming that their bonds to each other are of

primary importance.<sup>27</sup> Or women can join all-female communities because they are excluded from male institutions and have no other choice. The Oxford and Cambridge women's colleges were female communities with conflicting intentions. On the one hand, they did provide staff and students with a refuge from the wider world in which women's intellectual merits were slighted and ignored or looked upon with disapproval. On the other hand, they had been founded not so much out of a wish to create a learned community of women independent of that of men but because of the exclusionary policies of the men's colleges. A woman at one of the women's colleges could either feel a whole-hearted sense of identification with the female community or feel that it was second-best and that she was there only because she had the misfortune to be born female.

During her first year at Somerville, Vera Brittain experienced both feelings. She had already begun to define herself as a feminist and she certainly had expressed feminist feelings about women's right to ambition. That she consciously identified herself as a feminist when she came up to Oxford is revealed, for example, in the diary entry she made when she joined the Oxford Women's Suffrage Society: "I am very interested in it, as a small side of the enormous question of Feminism."<sup>28</sup> But although she had an abstract commitment to feminism, and a concrete sense of her own right to pursue serious work, she had thought little either about notions of femininity or about the issue of female solidarity. At twenty, Vera Brittain often defined herself as bored and irritated by other women. Her diary has frequent entries expressing her feeling of distance from women. For example, she says that she prefers her brother Edward's friends to her own, adding "as I really can't stand girls," and in another diary entry she writes of her "detestation of women."<sup>29</sup> And in a letter to Roland Leighton, her fiancé, written in April 1915 before her return for her final term before she departed for her war service, she said, "It is the feminine atmosphere I shall not be able to tolerate—strange how one can feel as I do about some women & be an ardent feminist still!...A feminine community is always appalling to anyone like me who gets on much better in the society of men."<sup>30</sup>

What did this rejection of the feminine community represent? Vera Brittain at twenty did not possess an awareness of a feminist point of view that would allow her to challenge the dominant perception that it was the masculine world that offered excitement, wider horizons, and challenges. In 1914, feminism meant for her not a sense of identification with other women, but rather a desire to enter the world of men. At this stage in her life Brittain associated femininity with repressiveness, epitomized for her by the Buxton matrons who responded with raised eyebrows to her intention to prepare for Oxford. For them, she recorded in her diary, she was "'eccentric,' 'ridiculous,' a 'strong-minded woman,'" and she adds: "It...is scarcely ever men who raise objections to a woman's being given what her talents deserve, but always other women. At first it seems extraordinary that women should be the retrogressive members just when the era of their true glory & justice is beginning to dawn. But I suppose it is that

women are sharply divided into two classes, the old-fashioned, who can see nothing & the new-fashioned, who see all."<sup>31</sup>

The contempt Brittain sometimes expressed for other women during her first year at Somerville was in large part a pose she adopted to hide from herself the fact that her personal relationships with fellow students and with the dons played a central part in her life at Somerville. She was afraid of being identified with what she defined then as the "schoolgirlish" side of Somerville life, even though it was those very aspects that she found the most satisfying and absorbing: like any good aspiring novelist, she was fascinated by the vagaries and the surprises of human personality—both her own and others'—and college offered her a greater variety than she had yet experienced.

The social life of the college and the patterns for friendship that were part of its tradition had an intense, claustrophobic quality. Much of college life revolved around personal relationships that were formed according to patterns that had developed over its thirty-five years of existence. There was, for example, a formal structure governing the making of friendships. The students addressed each other by their surnames until one of them proposed formally that they should become more intimate and use first names.<sup>32</sup> There was a social ritual that was based on hierarchical assumptions: the third-year students were the most important, the second years ranked second in line, and the "freshers," like Brittain in 1914, were definitely the least important. Second and third-year students for example were the initiators of social contact with those in their first year. The students gave rather formal tea and cocoa parties for each other. The following entry from Vera Brittain's diary gives a glimpse of the flavour of such a gathering:

Miss Ellis Fermor & I gave a tea party this afternoon to Miss Petrie; Miss Petty & Miss Ball. None of the conversation was deep & Miss Petrie did most of it....After they had gone, E.F. & I sat by the fire and discussed such things as standing alone...& truth & ideals.<sup>33</sup>

Somerville also sponsored all-women college dances, for which the students changed into evening dress, and there were a variety of other Somerville activities, or activities involving the other women's colleges, including athletics, debating, and the women's college literary magazine, *The Fritillary*. In fact, in these years just before the granting of degrees in 1920, after which the women students were much more closely integrated into university life than they had been earlier, there were many flourishing traditions associated with one or another of the women's colleges, or with the women's colleges as a group. Somerville, for example, had its mock parliament and its going-down play, and the students kept a detailed record of student activities in a handwritten communal diary, called the "Somerville Junior Common Room Log Book." Several of these institutions disappeared in the 1920s, largely because of the greater integration of the women students into the university. From the point of view of the development of strong and independent women's institutions, the process

provides an example of a case in which a positive achievement produced some negative results.

As one of the eight Scholars and Exhibitioners out of her class of thirty-five, Vera Brittain when she entered was already marked as having a special position. Her Exhibition and her own personality traits made her stand out amongst her classmates and by some she was marked down as slated to be one of the "lions" of her year.<sup>34</sup> Within a few weeks she had made both friends and enemies and her diary during her first year is full of copious entries about these budding friendships and conflicts.

She made friends quite quickly with the daughter of a retired naval commander, a student to whom she was attracted by the similarity of their backgrounds.<sup>35</sup> "I came across...a very interesting girl named Miss Hughes," she writes, "who comes from Winchester, is in the Cathedral set, which she hates, & has been to dances, parties etc. & got tired of them, & is thought pretty mad to go to college by her associates, & altogether seems in something the same box as I am."<sup>36</sup> She could agree with Norah Hughes about a number of things—for example, about "the stupidity of becoming dowdy just because you worked."<sup>37</sup> But there were tensions in this friendship of convenience right from its beginning, and by November Brittain had decided that "Miss Hughes finds me...too much in earnest & too little on the surface to please her."<sup>38</sup>

She also became fairly close to Una Mary Ellis-Fermor, one of the four other Exhibitioners in her year. Her friendship with this fellow student was never an intimate one, and always tinged with rivalry—on both sides apparently. For example, Brittain recorded in her diary only a few weeks after arriving that Miss Penrose—the Principal—had "taken me into dinner at night. It was a little formal as of course she keeps one at arm's length, but it was not at all terrifying." She adds, "I think she must be going through the scholarship people. I mentioned this fact to Miss Ellis-Fermor" who, Brittain records, replied that if so, *she* should have been taken into dinner first, as her Exhibition was the more valuable of the two. Unlike Norah Hughes, Una Mary Ellis-Fermor's social background was markedly different from Vera Brittain's. She was a Londoner whose family lived in West Hampstead and she had attended the South Hampstead High School (a Girls' Public Day School Trust school), followed by a brief interval at Bedford College.<sup>39</sup>

Vera continued to have a friendly if rivalrous relationship with her. They gave tea parties together several times, they met frequently, and they enjoyed serious discussions with each other. With her, for example, Brittain was able to share her thoughts about Somerville's limitations, thoughts that became increasingly pressing as the year wore on. In January, for example, she records discussing with Ellis-Fermor "the narrowness of College; their absurd attitude towards work and the time necessary to do it in, about the way in which you are treated like a child here as though you needed to be driven to do what you have chosen."<sup>40</sup>



For Vera Brittain these intense feelings surrounding friendships were painfully reminiscent of her school days. They seemed childish and embedded in the constricting femininity from which she wished to escape. For example, she refers in her diary to the "sentimental mawkishness" of some "weak" members of her own year who were very inclined to have "grand passions" for second and third-year "lions." "It is bringing the atmosphere of a private girls' school into college life, which will never do."<sup>41</sup>

While the friendships she made during her first year occupied much of her energy, none of them proved to be lasting. In contrast, the friendships she made during her second period at Somerville were to be central to her adult life. The most important of these was with the future novelist Winifred Holtby, whom she met in the autumn of 1919.<sup>42</sup> Vera's and Winifred's relationship began as a Somerville friendship. Both young women were reading history and they "coached" together in the autumn term in 1919, and after a stormy beginning,<sup>43</sup> they became intimate during the early months of 1920 and remained so until Winifred's early death in 1935. While their relationship quickly surpassed the limits of a college friendship, it is significant that their Somerville experience remained central to each of them separately, and to both of them together.<sup>44</sup>

Somerville's community was made up not only of students but also of its teaching staff, who played a significant role in the lives of their students. They were important not simply as teachers, but also as women whose lives offered a variation on the usual pattern of bourgeois femininity. If Vera Brittain is representative, the tutorial staff—the women "dons"—were central to the lives of their students. During her first year, Brittain recorded in her diary minute and voluminous descriptions of the intellectual capacities, the mannerisms, the dress and general appearance of each member of Somerville's Senior Common Room.<sup>45</sup> These women clearly played a large part in her thoughts and in shaping her feelings about the kind of adult woman she herself hoped to become.

Her response to the dons reveals much of the same ambivalence she had about Somerville as a female community. On the one hand, she had an enormous respect for some of them and a desire to gain their approval. In 1914 this was certainly the way she felt about the formidable Hilda Lorimer, Somerville's classics tutor. But on the other hand, there were facets of their personalities and of their way of life that she found unattractive. In some ways, the women dons represented yet another model for women that Vera Brittain had no wish to emulate: while they did not embody the repressiveness of the Buxton matrons, they still represented the narrowness of spinsterhood. As much as she respected her aunt Florence Bervon and Louise Heath-Jones, the life of the spinster schoolteacher seemed even more dreary than the life of an upper-middle-class matron, and the life of a don seemed only marginally preferable. To the conventionally pretty young woman who wore an evening cloak for her interview with Emily Penrose in the summer of 1913<sup>46</sup> the women dons represented dowdiness, and the entries she made in her diary reveal that as much as she respected them for their scholarship she perceived most of them as failures as

women, as the following entry about one of them, Miss Hayes Robinson, indicates:

I cannot help feeling she has somehow missed her vocation in life...she ought to have been married. I should say she is very clever indeed & self-reliant, without being either violently original or aggressively independent, & these qualities...would have made her an excellent wife & really the ideal & equal companion of some brilliant man....She is so far from being a typical don as to be quite unrecognisable as one if you did not know it; she is very far from sharing the donnish disregard of dress....To picture the Pen [Emily Penrose] soothing the wailing of a raging infant, or the Lorie [Hilda Lorimer] pushing a pram, is the kind of thing one could only imagine...in the wildest...dreams. But it does not seem ridiculous to imagine Miss Hayes Robinson doing any such thing. Perhaps she is nearer to the ideal type of woman—to the woman we hope the future will bring....She is an instance of a woman who has spent her life in the pursuit & imparting of knowledge...without losing an atom of her womanliness or feminine attractiveness....To see her is to feel that a don's life need not be a narrow routine & therefore a thing to dread.<sup>47</sup>

That entry not only reveals the young Vera Brittain's conventional conception of the "ideal woman," it provides an example of how closely she scrutinized the behaviour of Somerville's tutorial staff, and it reveals as well something of the life led by those who had posts as tutors at a women's college during these years. The Principal and staff together—the "Senior Common Room"—consisted of fewer than a dozen women<sup>48</sup> and the students numbered fewer than 150. The tutorial staff lived in the college and were expected to be involved with the emotional, social, and moral lives of their students, in addition to their teaching responsibilities. They could have had little opportunity to develop lives that were separate from the institution. Thus, when Vera Brittain commented on their "dowdiness" she was also responding, perhaps without realizing it, to their implied lack of sexuality, their almost nun-like quality. For in 1914, a woman's choice of an academic life meant choosing singleness.<sup>49</sup> But the women who chose it did not gain access to power. At this period, the tutors at the women's colleges had no clearly defined status within the university. They themselves, if they had studied at Oxford or Cambridge, did not even have degrees from those institutions, nor did they have a part in setting the exams for which they prepared their students, or in making decisions about the degree curriculum. In spite of their learning and their dedication, and in spite of the fact that for many of them their career offered the only way in which they themselves could pursue a life of scholarship, they were clearly second-class citizens within the university, forced to adopt a supplicatory, passive stance when dealing with the university authorities. Frequently, their position caused them to appear timid and even

argued that one of the great strengths of the women's colleges was that they provided a welcoming space for women who valued study and achievement. Brittain was a student at the very end of the period with which Vicinus deals and she is representative of a generation of women whose opportunities and, therefore, perceptions were distinctly different from those with whom Vicinus is primarily concerned. It is not surprising, therefore, that she chafed at the confines of Somerville more often than she acknowledged its support.

Brittain's acute ambivalence about Somerville as a community of women arose from her confusion about her own relationships with women and about the implications for feminism of bonds between women. Several historians have asserted that nineteenth-century women lived in a milieu where their primary ties were to women and that this was a natural outgrowth of the structures in which they lived.<sup>58</sup> But by Vera Brittain's period, these enforced bonds were crumbling as male-dominated institutions like Oxford modified themselves and as same-sex bonds in business and social life were gradually being replaced by an acceptance of mixed-sex patterns. With the benefit of hindsight many late twentieth-century feminists perceive that these changes involved losses as well as gains for women. But Brittain welcomed them. As she matured, her youthful rejection of Victorian and Edwardian femininity became a feminism that implied not only women's right to full equality with men but a vision of a society where barriers between men and women would disappear. As she grew older she developed a greater understanding of the need for female solidarity than she had displayed as an Oxford student, and she acknowledged the importance of friendships with women in her own life. But she remained convinced that any variety of "separate spheres" was both claustrophobic and destructive of women's intellect and energy, and her rejection of an enclosed feminine society became a central part of her feminist creed.<sup>59</sup>

Brittain's negative reactions to Somerville as a community of women when she was a student were reinforced by the weaknesses exhibited by the college as it approached the achievement of degrees for women. At this critical juncture in its history its stance was not designed to further the autonomy of women or to promote an awareness of the economic and social disadvantages that continued to hamper women. In these years Somerville wanted its students to conform to the male-dominated structure of the university. They were encouraged to do as well as possible in the examinations for the various Honours Schools, and to engage in no extracurricular activities that would call attention to their presence: in short, the college authorities hoped that they would behave in a conformist, quintessentially feminine manner. Indeed, on the eve of the achievement of their original goal—the inclusion of some women in the fabric of the university—the possibility that the women's colleges could act as agents of radical change evaporated.

education in the same fashion as men only if the women fulfilled exactly the same requirements as the male students.

In 1914, Somerville was taking an Emily Davies position: Emily Penrose and her staff knew that degrees for women would most probably be achieved in the near future and they were determined that all their students would have done the work necessary for the degree. The regulations affecting Vera Brittain most acutely were those based on the assumption that the student came to university with a knowledge of both classical languages. Because of these requirements, in her first year at Oxford, Brittain never in fact began to read English, the subject she had selected before entering. Instead she had to prepare for and pass two examinations: Responsions Greek, which in 1914 was still required for a degree in a Humanities subject, and Pass Moderations, which involved a knowledge of both classical languages, and some mathematics.<sup>53</sup>

Since Vera Brittain had no knowledge of Greek and little of Latin when she came to Somerville, clearly the programme of studies allowed her little time for any of the reading she wanted to do or for her writing, and any such activity was done in guiltily snatched intervals stolen from cramming for the necessary examinations. For example, in January 1915, she recorded in her diary: "Today's work consisted of logic & one solitary Latin Prose which took me about 3 hours as I found I had forgotten practically all my Latin & had to look up almost every word in the Dictionary."<sup>54</sup> Later that month she wrote: "I meant to do such a lot of work today & did in fact manage to finish the Apology this morning. This afternoon, however, instead of doing Homer I reviewed 'Sinister Street' Vol 2 for the *Fritillary* competition, and I also sent in another small poem....I have not 'Sinister Street' with me, which made the review rather difficult, but I was determined to do it."<sup>55</sup> A few months earlier she wrote: "I got hold of Schopenhauer out of the library this evening and became very thrilled over the Essay on Genius—at the expense of my logic."<sup>56</sup>

In spite of the narrowness and the limited nature of the tasks she had to perform, Oxford did allow her to expand her intellectual horizons, but for the most part the intellectual excitement she experienced occurred in spite of, rather than because of, the formal curriculum. In 1919 when she returned after the war, Brittain switched from English to history primarily because she wanted to study modern European international relations.<sup>57</sup> The curriculum certainly served her needs better than it had done in 1914-15, but she had also grown more critical of Somerville, and during 1919-21 and afterward, she maintained that much of the material she had been forced to learn in preparation for the History Honours School was not designed with her interests in mind.

What conclusions can be drawn from this paper's analysis of one Somervillian's experience as a student in the teens and early twenties? While Brittain enjoyed and profited from her Oxford education, she was not uncritical of it. From the point of view of recent historiography on women's friendships and women's communities, her response to Somerville as a community of women is particularly noteworthy. In *Independent Women*, Martha Vicinus has cogently

repressive in the eyes of their students. This is revealed, for example, by disputes over the issue of the chaperonage rules—the rules governing contact between women students and men—an issue over which there was more friction between students and staff than over the narrowness of the traditional curriculum. The authorities remained committed to these rules right through the period that Vera Brittain was a student, even though the students grew increasingly restive. In the spring of 1918, for example, when the students were putting pressure on the authorities to revise the chaperon's rules, Emily Penrose spoke to the "Junior Common Room" on May 7, 1918, explaining that "the history of the rules showed that the Principals of the women's colleges were not arbitrary legislators, but obliged by circumstances to conform with university conditions: friends had won the recognition of women as students on the understanding that these conditions would be strictly observed. It was also felt that the probable extension of the degree to women in the near future would make any revolutionary movement at the present very imprudent."<sup>50</sup>

Placed in the position of serving as authority figures when the real authority lay with others; forced to adopt a renunciatory attitude towards sexuality; forced by the nature of their situation to be conservative about intellectual and social matters: given these circumstances, it is understandable that the lives of the women tutors would have seemed unappealing in several ways to a young woman like Vera Brittain.

Somerville College in these years was, of course, primarily an educational institution, and only secondarily a community of women. We can learn something of the formal education to which a student was exposed through Brittain's experience. She had quite genuinely come to college to learn, though as she wrote in her diary during her first exciting week: "I again tried to do a little work, but work, for which I came here, seems at present to be what I am least capable of settling down to."<sup>51</sup> However, within a few days, she was working, and working well, during that first year.

But what sort of work was it? The Oxford curriculum, teaching methods, and requirements for the degree had been subjects of critical scrutiny since the middle of the nineteenth century, and there had been considerable alteration in what was acknowledged to be an antiquated system.<sup>52</sup> But in 1914, the course of studies for undergraduates retained many outmoded features.

From the time of Emily Davies's founding of Girton, those involved with the women's colleges at Cambridge and Oxford were divided about whether women students should be forced to follow the same curriculum as the men. The argument against such a position was that the degree requirements for male students were stultifying and inappropriate and that it was absurd to force young women to jump through hoops soon to be discarded. The argument for insisting that the women should do exactly what the men did was put forward most cogently by Emily Davies, who maintained that the women's movement would be able to convince a doubting world that women were indeed capable of pursuing

## NOTES

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1. On the role that Oxford and Cambridge played in the development of a professional elite, see W. J. Reader, *Professional Men: The Rise of the Professional Classes in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966). See also Sheldon Rothblatt, *The Revolution of the Dons: Cambridge and Society in Victorian England* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968); V.H.H. Green, *A History of Oxford University* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1974); Charles Edward Mallet, *A History of the University of Oxford* (1927; reprint, New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc. and London: Methuen, 1968); and A.J. Engel, *From Clergyman to Don: The Rise of the Academic Profession in Nineteenth-Century Oxford* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1983).
  2. Girton College's history began not at Girton but in a house in Hitchin, where in 1869 the first students enrolled in Davies's experimental college. On the significance of the campaign for the higher education of women, see, *inter alia* Joan Burstyn, *Victorian Education and the Ideal of Womanhood* (London: Croom Helm, 1980); Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), chap. 4 and *passim*. For the history of women at Cambridge, see Rita McWilliams-Tullberg, *Women at Cambridge: A Men's University—Thought of a Mixed Type* (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1975) and Perry Williams, "Pioneer Women Students at Cambridge, 1869-1881," in *Lessons for Life: The Schooling of Girls and Women, 1850-1950*, ed. Felicity Hunt (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 171-91. For women at Oxford: Vera Brittain, *The Women at Oxford: A Fragment of History* (London: George G. Harrap, 1960); M.A.H. Rogers, *Degrees by Degree* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938).
  3. As Martha Vicinus points out: "The movement for women's higher education was part of a much larger 'revolution of the dons,' in which both Oxford and Cambridge were transformed into modern teaching and research institutions." Vicinus, *Independent Women*, 122.
  4. Published sources for Vera Brittain's own account of her Somerville experience include *Testament of Youth* (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd., and New York: Macmillan, 1933) and her first novel, *The Dark Tide* (London: Grant Richards, 1923). Brittain also wrote a history of the women's colleges at Oxford: Brittain, *The Women at Oxford*. Unpublished material, including diaries and letters, are housed in the Vera Brittain Archive, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario [hereinafter VBA]. Portions of the diary for this period have been published as *Chronicle of Youth: Vera Brittain's War Diary, 1913-1917*, ed. Alan Bishop with Terry Smart (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1981). See also Hilary Bailey, *Vera Brittain* (London: Penguin, 1986) and John Catlin, *Family Quartet* (London: Hamish Hamilton, Ltd., 1987).
  5. On the history of Somerville College to 1921, see Muriel St. Clare Byrne and Catherine Hope Mansfield, *Somerville College, 1879-1921* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1922); Vera Farnell, *A Somervillian Looks Back* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948); Brittain, *The Women at Oxford*.
  6. Evidence for her attitudes is scattered throughout the "Reflective Record" (unpublished diary) for 1913 and 1914, VBA. For an example, see the entry for Oct. 25, 1913 in which she muses about the connection between the literary imagination

- and knowledge. She wishes to become an "imaginative artist" but adds: "Not that I think for a moment that the Oxford studentship is unnecessary. It is the indispensable foundation of the imagination....knowledge is God."
7. That she did is evident even from *Testament of Youth* itself, where, reading between the lines, it is clear that her parents aided her in finding and paying for tutors and in agreeing to pay her College fees. The unpublished letters and her diary reveal the extent to which her parents offered emotional and material support both when she was preparing to enter Somerville, and when she was a student there.
  8. For Louise Heath Jones see *St. Monica's School Notes* (1931-2), an "In Memoriam" issue, which discussed her career, and which reprinted her obituary from *The Times*, in VBA (in "Juvenelia, Section C, 'Art Work'").
  9. Vera Brittain's St. Monica's school essays are in VBA ("Juvenelia", Box 2).
  10. In *Testament of Youth*, Brittain describes being inspired by reading Olive Schreiner's *Woman and Labour* in 1911, in the garden at St. Monica's. "Miss Heath Jones lent me the book soon after its publication, and I can still tingle with the excitement of the passage.... 'We take all labour for our province'," 41.
  11. This is Vera Brittain's own phrase, which she used to describe the period she spent between school and college. Chapter II of *Testament of Youth* is entitled "Provincial Young-Ladyhood."
  12. Vera Brittain's diary entries for 1912-13 reveal this supportiveness. For example, it was her mother, in May, 1913, who set about finding Vera a Latin tutor: "Mother telephoned this morning to Mr. Robinson about the Latin lessons," VBA, "Reflective Record" (unpublished diary), May 26, 1913.
  13. "[Winifred] used to say that she was one of the very few women who went to Oxford because their mothers wished it." Vera Brittain, *Testament of Friendship: The Story of Winifred Holtby* (London: Virago, 1980), 47 (*Testament of Friendship*, Brittain's biography of Winifred, was first published in 1940).
  14. Jameson describes her path to university in her autobiography, explaining that her mother helped to plan that she would do well at the Municipal School in Scarborough, well enough to win one of the "three County Scholarships—worth sixty pounds awarded on the results of the Matriculation examination." See Margaret Storm Jameson, *Autobiography of Storm Jameson: Journey from the North, Volume I* (London: Virago, 1984), 46. She used the scholarship to attend Leeds. "A Miss Douthwaite, who taught drawing in Whitby, an uncommonly cultivated woman, begged my mother to send me to Newnham. It was out of the question—even in 1910 sixty pounds was a pittance. We did not give Newnham a thought. But Cambridge might have steadied me and taught me to make better use of my mind." *Ibid.*, 51.
  15. For Maynard see C.B. Firth, *Constance Louisa Maynard: Mistress of Westfield College* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1949); Vicinus, *Independent Women*, chap. 4, *passim*; and Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (London: Croom Helm & Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 155-61.
  16. This was certainly the case until after the First World War. It was only with the Education Act of 1902 that any provision was made for working-class children: "For the first time it became possible for the children of working-class people to obtain university training. In spite of scholarships, the expense of a course at Oxford or Cambridge often proved an insuperable obstacle....Another barrier was that caused by the insistence upon Greek as a condition for matriculation." S.J. Curtis, *History of Education in Great Britain* (London: University Tutorial Press, Ltd., 1948),

460-61. The situation did begin to improve after the passage of the 1918 Education Act and the First World War. The numbers of students attending university "from Grant-aided secondary schools was less than a thousand in 1910. It had risen to more than 4,000 by 1939." W.G.H. Armytage, *Four Hundred Years of English Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 222.

17. Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 41.
18. Quoted in Brittain, *The Women at Oxford*, 50.
19. *Ibid.*, 88.
20. *Ibid.*, 73, 120.
21. Vera Brittain movingly describes Oct. 14, 1920, the first occasion on which women received degrees, in *Testament of Youth*, 507.
22. Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 495.
23. See the Somerville College General Register for the Entering Class, Oct. 1914, which lists age, religious affiliation, previous education, and father's occupation. I thank Somerville College for permission to consult these records.
24. See *Somerville College Report and Calendar* for 1913-1914 & 1914-1915.
25. For these figures, see Arthur Marwick, *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War* (London: Macmillan Student Editions, 1973), 23.
26. Vicinus, *Independent Women*, 123-24.
27. Much has been written by historians of women in recent years on the subject of women's sense of community with each other, and on what has been called "women's culture." Historians of women's experience in the United States have been especially interested in this approach, in the development of which the work of Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has been of major importance. See her *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985). One great strength of Vicinus' *Independent Women* is that Vicinus employs the concept of women's communities, without denying that they could be constricting, as well as liberating.
28. VBA, "Reflective Record," Oct. 22, 1914.
29. *Ibid.*, July 13, 1914 and Feb. 6, 1915.
30. VBA, Vera Brittain to Roland Leighton, Apr. 15, 1915.
31. VBA, "Reflective Record," Oct. 21, 1913.
32. She records in her diary a conversation with two upper-year students: "They told me about 'proposals,' which seems to be a kind of ceremony you go through if you wish to call a person you have taken a fancy to by her Christian name." VBA, "Reflective Record," Oct. 13, 1914.
33. *Ibid.*, Jan. 21, 1915.
34. Vera Brittain records in her diary that her friend Miss Hughes told her "that by the 2nd & 3rd year people I am considered one of the 'lions'—perhaps *the* 'lion' of my year." *Ibid.*, Oct. 14, 1914.
35. For information about Norah Hughes, see Somerville College Register for Entering Class, Oct. 1914. Norah Hughes left to do war work during the First World War, and appears not to have returned to Somerville afterwards.
36. VBA, "Reflective Record," Oct. 9, 1914.
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*, Nov. 5, 1914.
39. See Somerville College Register for Entering Class, Oct. 1914.
40. VBA, "Reflective Record," Jan. 29, 1915.



41. Ibid., Oct. 17, 1914. On the "Grand Passion" or schoolgirl crush, see Vicinus, *Independent Women*.
42. See Jean E. Kennard's recent excellent social and literary analysis of the friendship: Jean E. Kennard, *Vera Brittain & Winifred Holtby: A Working Partnership* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1989).
43. Their friendship began with a quarrel about a Somerville College debate on the question "That four years' travel are a better education than four years at a university." Vera, who was feeling isolated and lonely after her return to Oxford after her war service, argued for the affirmative, criticizing the narrowness of Somerville life. Winifred responded, and the audience, offended by Vera's criticisms, was clearly on Winifred's side. At the time, Vera believed that the debate had been planned with the deliberate intention of humiliating her. She would later describe the incident at length in her first published novel, *The Dark Tide*, and in *Testament of Youth* and she mentions it briefly in *Testament of Friendship*. But while the incident looms large in her later accounts, her correspondence with her mother during her second period at Somerville, which is full of day-to-day details of college life of the sort that reflect her keen involvement in Oxford life, indicate that while she may have felt somewhat estranged from college life on first returning, by the end of 1919, she felt at home at Somerville once more.
44. The subject of the importance of Somerville connections in later life for professional women like Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby goes beyond the scope of this paper. I offer one indication here of the fact that Somerville continued to play a part in Vera Brittain's life: in 1929, she wrote an article for the women's magazine *Good Housekeeping* entitled "The Somerville School of Novelists," in which she discussed Margaret Kennedy, Winifred Holtby, Sylvia Thompson, Hilda Reid, Muriel Jaeger, Margaret Leigh, and Dorothy Sayers, as well as herself. It is interesting that by 1929, when she had become more conscious of the barriers created by social class, she praised Somerville for its open admissions policy, emphasizing that it was non-denominational and welcomed students who were Catholics, Jews, or atheists; "class is also a matter of indifference" and "ex-elementary school-girls" were "welcomed...gladly." Press clipping from *Good Housekeeping*, Apr. 1929, in the Winifred Holtby papers, Hull Central Library. The College Registers from Vera Brittain's own student days would indicate that such openness existed more in theory than in fact. Even the non-denominational character of Somerville in the pre-First World War years, at any rate, had only limited importance. The majority of the entering class in October 1914 were Church of England. The remainder, except for one Greek Orthodox student, were Nonconformist Protestants. Somerville College General Register: Entering Class, Oct. 1914.
45. The dons figure prominently in her diary accounts and in her letters home, in 1914, and in her letters to her mother in 1919 and 1920 (a period for which there is no surviving diary). VBA, "Reflective Record" and letters to Edith Brittain.
46. "Being quite ignorant of the plain-Jane-and-no-nonsense conventions of Oxford women dons, I had carefully changed, in accordance with the sartorial habits of Buxton, into evening dress, and was wearing a flimsy lace frock under a pale blue and grey reversible satin cloak....So unlike the customary felt hat and mackintosh of the average 1913 woman student was this provincially modish attire, that the Principal actually referred to it...the following March.... 'you're the girl who came across the lawn in a blue evening cloak.'" Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 66.

47. VBA, "Reflective Record," Oct. 8, 1914. Miss Hayes Robinson did, in fact marry: see Byrne and Mansfield, *Somerville College*, 94. As Martha Vicinus says of the Oxford and Cambridge women dons: "Lecturers fell into three familiar categories: the traditional schoolteacher, the emotional and motherly, or the intellectual and asexual." Vicinus, *Independent Women*, 148.
48. A clipping from the *Lady's Pictorial* in the Somerville Log Book II, Hilary term, 1920 describes the Senior Common Room for that year in detail.
49. Martha Vicinus points this out: see *Independent Women*, 148-152: "The lecturers at the women's colleges faced the same problems as all single women of this period," she says (148), and she goes on to analyze the difficulties they had in being role models for their students, and the anomalies of their position. An idea of the marriage rate for women who had been dons can be gleaned from the incomplete list of Oxford women tutors Vera Brittain includes in *The Women at Oxford*. The list begins with Annie Rogers, who was an Association for the Education of Women tutor, and later tutor at St. Hugh's. Her career began in 1879. Brittain's list ends with M.E. Hubbard appointed Classics Tutor at St. Anne's in 1953. Of the twenty-nine names included, five are listed as ever marrying. See Table I following p. 242.
50. Somerville College, Somerville College Log Book II, entry included in entry for Easter and Trinity Term, 1918.
51. VBA, "Reflective Record," Oct. 12, 1914.
52. The standard histories agree that modern Oxford dates from the Commission of 1877 and the second University Reform Act (1877): e.g., "In the century which followed the second university reform act the modern university took shape." Green, *A History of Oxford University*, 178, and see also, Mallet, *University of Oxford*, Vol. III, 340ff, for a discussion of the reforms of the 1877 Act. Engel, *From Clergyman to Don*, chaps. 4 and 5, discusses the limitations of the reforms.
53. For Pass Moderations, which was established in 1850, see Mallet, *University of Oxford*, vol. III, 29: "The subjects of the new examination were to be the Holy Gospels in Greek, polite literature, and mathematics: but a test of classical scholarship was the chief aim in view."
54. VBA, "Reflective Record," Jan. 18, 1915.
55. *Ibid.*, Jan. 25, 1915.
56. *Ibid.*, Oct. 15, 1914.
57. *Testament of Youth*, 471.
58. For example, see Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: 'Woman's Sphere' in New England 1780-1835* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1977) and Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*. (In her perceptive "The New Woman as Androgyne," included in *Disorderly Conduct*, Smith-Rosenberg discusses some of the problems created by new circumstances in the early twentieth century.)
59. I discuss Vera Brittain's feminism in the 1920s and 1930s in "'Have we really rounded Seraglio Point?' Vera Brittain and Feminism in the Interwar Period," in *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Harold L. Smith (Upleadon, Glos., England: Edward Elgar, 1990), 84-103.



A WOMAN AT OXFORD:  
VERA BRITAIN'S SOMERVILLE EXPERIENCE\*

*Deborah Gorham*

In the early years of the twentieth century, the universities of Oxford and Cambridge served several functions. For centuries attendance at one of the two institutions had been an accepted part of the education of young men of the aristocracy and gentry. In the nineteenth century their scope had widened. Not only did the sons of the landed classes attend Oxford or Cambridge but so also did those of the new Victorian upper middle class. University reform in the nineteenth century was designed both to make the institutions more open and to make them more rigorous and competitive. The Oxford and Cambridge of the second half of the nineteenth century, together with the public schools, prepared elite males to assume positions of power in professions and government. The men who managed the political, intellectual, social, and moral institutions of the country had almost invariably attended one of the two universities.<sup>1</sup>

Until the end of the 1860s, Oxford and Cambridge had been bastions of male privilege. But beginning with Emily Davies's successful efforts to establish an affiliation between Girton College and Cambridge, a group of upper-middle-class Victorian reformers had succeeded in gaining a foothold for women at both universities. The women were not unequivocally welcomed, nor were they granted full university membership at either institution, but the doors had at least been opened.<sup>2</sup> That Victorian campaign was an integral part of the period's movement for women's emancipation but it was also part of a more general movement to reform the two universities to ensure that they would better serve the needs of the new nineteenth-century professional middle classes.<sup>3</sup>

This paper offers an analysis of the significance that attendance at one of the elite universities had for middle-class women in the first part of the twentieth century, through an examination of the experience of one woman, the feminist pacifist writer Vera Britain (1893-1970), who was a student at Somerville College, Oxford, in 1914-15, and then in 1919-21. Vera Britain is best known for *Testament of Youth*, her autobiographical account of the years 1900-25, which was first published in 1933. *Testament of Youth* was her most successful book but it represents only a part of the autobiographical work of a writer whose