



Isabel Marion Weir Johnston

Period and Area of activity at TCD: 1904 in English and French

Isabel Marion Weir Johnston was the first woman student to register in Trinity College Dublin in January 1904. She did this at a time of great resistance towards women being admitted into the College, with the Board of College turning down a petition by 10,000 signatories in 1892 calling for the abolition of the ban against admittance of women, warning that “If a female had once passed the gate....it would be practically impossible to watch what buildings or what chambers she might enter, or how long she might remain there.” George Salmon, the former Provost memorialised in a statue today located beside the Campanile, is rumoured to have stated “women will enter Trinity College over my dead body”. Interestingly he died the day she arrived in Dublin to join the College in January 1904, with her examination then delayed until after his funeral.

Weir Johnston and the forty other women who were admitted nine months later that year were subject to restrictions such as not being allowed to attend lectures, use the dining facilities, be present on the campus grounds after 6pm, or join the two major societies, the Hist and the Phil, until the 1960s. According to her contemporaries, she stood out with her “remarkable personality” and “outstanding character symptomatic of the new world of the 20th century”, organising dances, tennis tournaments, and founding the Elizabethan Society which served as the major debating and social society for women until restrictions were lifted in the 1960s. Women gathered in “the Eliz” Society’s rooms in House 6 to eat (there being nowhere else in College for women to eat at the time) and use the resident sewing machine to make their evening ball dresses.

Weir Johnston didn’t graduate from Trinity College as she fell in love with a Junior TCD Fellow and subsequently settled down in London. However she certainly paved the way in TCD for future women students, with 58% of the student body now comprised of female students. With the recent International Women’s Day drawing attention to the continuing causes of women’s rights and gender equality, this would be a fitting opportunity to memorialise Trinity’s first woman student and allow her to take her place next to the George Salmons of TCD’s posterity.