

CASE STUDY

ANN-MARIE RICHARDSON TRACES EVIDENCE OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY GATHERINGS IN THE 19TH CENTURY

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PhD Thesis: *Soirées, science and museums: region and metropolis, 1850 – 1924*

SOCIETY LADIES

Ann-Marie Richardson, a PhD student at Lancaster University, is researching the evolution of the Royal Society soirées – evening exhibitions showcasing scientific and technological innovations – from their peak of popularity in the mid-19th century until their gradual decline after World War I.

In late 2020, she looked at the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) archive on Wiley Digital Archives (WDA) to explore the role of women at the Society soirées. "I wanted to find evidence of women in attendance at the RGS evening meetings during the 19th century, as well as the initial inclusion of women as fellows.

"I knew that using the keyword "ladies" in addition to "women" would return more results, due to the vernacular of the era. I also searched "Royal Society"; "soirée"; "conversazione" and "evening meetings".

Images from the Royal Geographical Society archive



Zooming in on Discovery



"I used the typeset transcripts feature, as some of the handwriting was difficult to read. Thanks to the on-screen citations tab, I could keep an ongoing bibliography for my notes."

Richardson was hoping to find letters and council meeting minutes reflecting the inclusion of women, and evidence of the Royal Society and the Royal Geographical Society collaborating over exhibits to include at their soirées and evening meetings.

"I read the letters and council meeting minutes and made notes. I used the typeset transcripts feature, as some of the handwriting was difficult to read. Thanks to the on-screen citations tab, I could keep an ongoing bibliography for my notes. The "zoom" option also allowed me to look closer at the most illegible handwriting.

Findings



"I was able to locate the materials I needed," says Richardson. "An unexpected find was a letter by Ellen Toynbee, one of the ladies I had come across in my research on female exhibitors at Royal Society soirées."

"I was able to locate the materials I needed," says Richardson. "An unexpected find was a letter by Ellen Toynbee, one of the ladies I had come across in my research on female exhibitors at Royal Society soirées. Searches for her correspondence in other archives had been unsuccessful, but I found one of Toynbee's letters in the Royal Geographical Society archive on Wiley Digital Archives.

[\("Toynbee, Mr. and Mrs. Henry." Correspondence Blocks, 7 July 1856–25 Nov. 1860\).](#)

"I also found a folder containing press cuttings and council meeting minutes discussing the potential admission of women as fellows. The cuttings revealed that the press agreed with the decision to restrict female admission to a select few. This demonstrated the reluctance even within the wider public to admit women—an attitude every woman wishing to join a scientific society would be made aware of—as well as an intriguing fear of the 'trouble making' suffragettes." ([Correspondence and notes/printed does re admission of women, news cuttings re selection of women, F. G. Aflalo, Douglas W. Freshfield, et al., Additional Papers, 1809-1915, Source: Royal Geographical Society.](#))

Images from the Royal Geographical Society archive



Next Steps

"I intend to compare the RGS council's approach to the inclusion of women as fellows to that of the Royal Society. The most obvious contrast is that RGS permitted women earlier (restricted admission in 1892-1893, permanent admission in 1913) than the Royal Society (permanent admission in 1935).

"This offers some insight – especially when compared to other societies – on the effects that the aftermath of WWI and Women's Suffrage had upon the inclusion of women. Another factor is the financial incentive which potentially influenced the RGS's inclusion of women – including membership fees and evening meeting tickets. I also hope to compare the experiences of female guests at RGS evening meetings to that of the Royal Society soirées."

Images from the Royal Geographical Society archive



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