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Menis, Susanna (2021) The story of Eliza Orme, the first English female law graduate. [Video]

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Hi, I am Dr Susy Menis, and I am a law lecturer at Birkbeck School of Law.

I'm really pleased to be doing this video as part of the Birkbeck Inspires series

In this video, I am going to tell you the story of Eliza, the university law student.

The aim of this story is to understand Eliza's options and experience, as a middle-class young woman, within the wider context of the period she lived in.

For the nineteenth-century Eliza, attending university lectures was not a usual practice;

As late as 1899 male students were still challenging women's admission to university on the ground of their 'intellectual inferiority'.

Attending University

Eliza was twenty-two when she started attending lectures at University College London. UCL

According to the 1871 Census, she was lodging at the house of a retired barrister in a small village in Wiltshire (wilt-shuh);

possibly teaching his niece chemistry.

Attendance at University lectures was not the obvious choice for a middle class young woman; Eliza's female contemporaries were expected to find a suitable match and settle into home domesticity.

Eliza might have had similar aspirations: by that time her three older sisters were already married and had several children.

However, the country's socio-political turmoil in which Eliza grew up in meant that she was familiar with the restless struggle between those challenging social hierarchies and those reluctant to let go traditional myths of social order.

She must have been aware of the campaigns related to women franchisement.

A few years earlier, her mother signed John Stuart Mill's petition advocating women's suffrage;

her mother also joined the London National Society for Women's Suffrage in 1867.

The fact that Eliza could actually walk into UCL, albeit through its back doors, and possibly sit in its newly built Slade School's lecture halls, should not be underestimated.

This was a privilege which was only about one year old;

whilst previously, allowing women to attend public lectures at all, was made available in few instances only in public places accessible also to women, at the discretion of the professors.

However, widening higher education to women should be understood within the bigger context of improving education generally, and specifically to middle class women.

In fact, Eliza was not extraneous to institutional education.

As a girl, she attended Bedford College which was opened in 1849 out of the dissatisfaction of the small privately run and expensive 'boarding colleges' for girls.

Education for middle-class girls was not unusual;

however, joining an institution such as Bedford College, which epitomised the socio-political conflict in relation to women's social position must have been a challenging family decision to take.

We know that Eliza's mother was a suffrage activist;

but just a few years earlier, Eliza's aunty was immortalised by her husband, Coventry Patmore, as the ideal Lady, 'the Angel in the House'.

This conflicting home environment reflected current public debate.

Writing such as by Mrs Sandford, Sarah Lewis and others, argued that a woman's civic duty is in the nurturing and education of the younger generation.

The media also contributed to the debate by suggesting that women such as Eliza's mother 'disturb the whole relations of social life'.

However, social hierarchies were challenged.

For example, Margaret Mylne argued in the *Westminster Review*

that marriage cannot any longer stand as the only 'credible method of retaining [women] place in society'.

She suggested that these women may not be 'useful and active members of society';

for this reason, she said, their full recognition as citizens- hence, enjoying both rights and duties- should be allowed.

Eliza must have found this conflict tedious;

it is known that during this period the social and psychological pressure to appear as a model wife, mother and daughter, was immense.

However, the insistence on the ideal of womanhood did not sit well any longer with the reality faced by many young middle-class women.

Proper education was now essential to allow the opening of employment opportunities for the surplus of women who would never marry.

No doubt, as custom dictated, Eliza's father and her unmarried brothers would provide her financially anyway, the family had a distillery business.

However, given the changing dynamic of home economics during this period and the fact that the family house employed four female servants according to the Census, meant that Eliza would have had little to do and spend her time in idle socialising and sedentary leisuring.

Later in life, Eliza contributed an opinion piece to a newspaper, saying that she did not find it an attractive prospect to become one of those women 'we have long been accustomed to recognise' those women 'who know nothing of politics or business, but are ever ready with advice and sympathy on either subject.'

Studying Law

The Ladies' Educational Association had a major role in widening women access to higher education;

in 1861, it convinced University College London to use its premise for the delivery of a whole course of animal physiology;

this was a women only class, taken on Saturdays at 3pm; and 113 women subscribed to it.

Middle-class women attended university lectures for different reasons: leisure, entertainment and even for the prospect of finding a husband.

So, to alleviate parents' anxiety for the risks of scandals, a back-door entrances was arranged, and thirty minutes gaps between female classes and male classes.

It is not unlikely that Eliza might have had one of these aims in mind;

however, she later said in 1886 that 'English girls do not as a rule have fixed notions of their future, and certainly do not conform to any which may exist in the minds of parents [...]'.
[...]

Perhaps Eliza attended some of the lectures available in 1871 in science or literature.

This experience must have been accompanied by concerns such as travelling alone on the train to reach University, and acquaintances views on her 'spoiled' womanhood.

On her part, Eliza expressed her opinion clearly, and to the *Examiner newspaper* she said that she certainly does not feel that she should be labelled with what became to be a pejorative term: 'sound-minded' or 'strong-minded' woman.

She did not approve the practice of women wearing men-cloths, or being 'uselessly eccentric'- she said that she was merely wearing 'ordinary bonnets and carry[ing] medium-size umbrellas'.

From 1872 Eliza was able to sit in mixed-sex classrooms, but it was only from 1873 that she would have been able to attend classes in Jurisprudence and from 1875 also classes in Roman law.

Eliza might have never met the first Chair of Jurisprudence at UCL, John Austin, but she would study from his textbook *Lectures on Jurisprudence*.

It may also be that John Stuart Mill, a friend of Eliza's family, and a former student of Austin, encouraged her to attend these class.

She was certainly enthusiastic about studying law given that she was awarded three scholarships.

Whatever was Eliza's initial aim in attending university education, it is clear that her goal became more practical.

She would need to wait two more years to be able to gain a certificate recognising her studies in law and ten additional years for her Bachelor of Law degree (LLB).

However, whether she dreamt to become a lawyer, she did not need a university law degree for that.

From an interview given by Eliza in 1903 we know that she acted on the advice given to her by John Stuart Mill and two university law professors and barristers, when she joined the office of a conveyancer as a trainee in 1873.

It seems that her pragmatic approach paid off; commenting on this experience she said that she was 'busily employed' finding it 'both an interesting and profitable employment'.

Once joining the conveyance office, Eliza made inquiries to see whether there would be a way for her to join the Inns on Courts which was the common route to enter the legal profession.

But perhaps, given the low reputation this training had gained, she was not too disappointed to learn that such a prospect was not available to her.

In addition, the common believe was that Court's work was a Gentleman's job; in fact, Eliza's view was that 'the occupation of a conveyance [was] quite suitable to a woman'- advocacy was far too exciting.

Conclusion

Eliza Orme was growing up in exiting times. She might have been expected to find a suitable husband and settle into family life, but other options were open to her too.

She did not seem to have taken a consistently active part in the women suffrage movement;

however, the fact that social hierarchies were being challenged in this period meant that her higher education ventures might have met with little parental resistance.

Also, like many other young middle-class women she was faced by the possibility of spinsterhood, being financially supported by her family, whilst spending her days in idle leisure.

The opening of new opportunities for women, meant that Eliza could escape this prospect. Eliza never became a lawyer, but perhaps she never intended to become one. Like many of my law students, her success laid in her resilience against the odds. 'Success' for Eliza and for many of my law students must lay in the transforming life experience of taking charge of one's own life.

I Hope you've enjoyed this, please find out more by visiting the Birkbeck website www.bbk.ac.uk