

Inspirational Women in Geography's Past

The hidden half of the Tyneside Geographical Society

Grace Heavey, BA Geography, g.heavey1@newcastle.ac.uk, Supervisor: Helen Jarvis

Introduction and aims

The project aims to bring to life the untold stories of inspirational women who lectured at the Tyneside Geographical Society (founded in 1887). Few women were lucky enough to have the opportunity to explore and travel due to the social restraints of gender and class. Those that did often accompanied their husbands and their discoveries were usually overshadowed. The information will be used for the metadata of the digital version of the TGS visitors' book. The project also highlights some of the women involved in the earlier years of the Newcastle University Geography department.

Methods

I began by working with the restored visitors' book of the Tyneside Geographical Society and picked out the very few female signatures within the hundreds of males. I then examined archives in the libraries at Newcastle and Durham universities and the LSE Women's Library to develop the biographies further. Analysing the visitors' book enabled these women's stories to be uncovered. Many women's voices and stories do not appear in the history of Geography and archive research helps to rectify this. I also interviewed RGS director Rita Gardner and former staff from the Newcastle Geography department.

Conclusion

Not surprisingly, the proportion of women who spoke at the Tyneside Geographical Society in the late 1800s and early 1900s compared to men was very low. However, what is truly shocking, given the improving nature of women in civil society, is the number of female speakers was higher 100 years ago than it was in the late 1970s and 1980s. But the project highlights that although only a small number of women have been involved in TGS and the Geography department at Newcastle, all these individuals have made a huge contribution to the history of Geography.

Timeline of the women featured in the TGS visitors book

1890-1950	20 women spoke at the TGS
1950-1990	No women spoke at the TGS
1990-Present	5 women spoke at the TGS



Examples of findings

Lily Grove

Lily Grove (pictured left) was the first woman to lecture at Tyneside Geographical Society. Born in 1855, she married British master mariner Charles Baylee Grove and wrote articles about their South American travels. Some touched on social issues including crime and women's education. Lily remarried in 1896 and devoted the rest of her life to husband James George Frazer and his work. Her career was overshadowed by her husband's but her legacy should not be overlooked. She published articles and books, and was among the first female members of the Royal Geographical Society. She died in 1941 aged 86 – just hours after her husband passed away.

Mary Sheepshanks

Mary Sheepshanks (pictured right) was born in Liverpool in 1872. She visited the Tyneside Geographical Society in November 1925 and apparently spoke about her South American travels. Her life differed to the other privileged women who spoke at TGS. She had 16 siblings and her childhood was said to be bleak. Her "advanced views" on politics, feminism and religion led to her family rejecting her. She left England to stay with her brother in Uruguay in 1921 and travelled much of South America. Upon her 1924 return, she began a lecture tour. She was a campaigner for women's suffrage and a pacifist who opposed World War One.



"Mary Sheepshanks' feminism was inspired both by outrage at the brutal injustice suffered by women and by faith that emancipated, enfranchised women could help humanise the world" – Sybil Oldfield



Vera Baird and Helen Jarvis with the restored Tyneside Geographical Society's visitors book

References and acknowledgments

I would like to thank my supervisor and Newcastle University who funded this project for the opportunity.
Maddrell (2011) Complex locations: women's geographical work in the UK 1850-1970
Oldfield, S., 1984. *Spinsters of this parish: The life and times of FM Mayor and Mary Sheepshanks*. Virago.
Newcastle University archives



Margaret Tyrrell

Margaret Tyrrell was born in 1907 in Watford, the daughter of a geology lecturer. In 1926/27, she became the first female lecturer to work in the geography department at Newcastle University (then Armstrong College). She was temporarily responsible for the department in 1929 aged just 22. She was partially responsible for setting up Armstrong College Geographical Society and helped to devise a syllabus of lectures with immediate success. She left the geography department in 1931 to marry. The departmental report of 1930/31 says she had endured a tough year and her health had suffered. But it thanked her for her complete devotion to her work.