

A Victorian Feminist in Bloomsbury: remembering the educational life and networks of Jane Agnes Chessar (1835-1880)

Jane Martin in conversation with Melissa Benn, 21 March 2024

Birth of Jane Agnes Chessar, Edinburgh.	1835	1836	Home & Colonial School Society for the education of children and training of teachers established.
Elizabeth Mayo becomes the first woman in England to be employed in teacher training.	1843	1848	Queen's College, London, established for women who intend to teach.
North London Collegiate School established by Frances Buss.	1850	1851	Chessar enters the Home & Colonial Training College.
Langham Place Group founded.	1858	1862	Payment by Results is introduced in elementary education: each child expected to pass annual test, needlework compulsory for girls.
Royal Commission on middle class education includes girls after feminist pressure.	1864	1866	Chessar resigns her position on the staff of the Home and Colonial due to ill-health, teaches geography at the North London Collegiate.
Girton College established.	1869	1870	Education act: elementary education available to all. First elections to School Boards; Emily Davies and Elizabeth Garrett elected in London.
Chessar elected to represent women teachers on the Council of the College of Preceptors.	1871	1872	Girls' Public Day School Company established.
Chessar and Alice Cowell elected to the School Board for London.	1873	1875	Chessar makes trip to Algiers on health grounds; Headmistresses' Association established.
Chessar one of two examiners at first examination held by the Froebel Society.	1876	1877	Chessar joins Teacher's Training & Registration Society established by Maria Grey.
London University admits women to degrees; domestic economy established as a compulsory subject for elementary schoolgirls.	1878	1879	Chessar writes <i>On Teaching Geography</i> for London Association of Schoolmistresses; persuades her friend Mary Richardson to contest School Board elections.
Chessar attends education conference at Brussels; dies in Belgium on 3 September.	1880		

Teacher Education: On the Instruction of Pupil Teachers (1862)

‘At the Christmas examinations for 1861 there was a much larger proportion than usual of candidates who failed to obtain Queen’s scholarships... I looked carefully at all the papers worked by the students in my class both at their entrance and at their Easter examination. It appears to me that there is not much fault to be found with the extent of ground over which, as pupil-teachers, they passed, but that accuracy and thoroughness of work are things to which more attention might very advantageously have been given... pupil-teachers are no longer to be apprenticed to mistresses, but to managers; the instruction is not to be paid for separately by Government... Let every schoolmistress who has the charge of pupil-teachers under the new system... earnestly strive honourably to fulfil her engagements, and that not because she is bound to man, but because she has the fear and love of God before her eyes. Only in this manner will it be proved that teachers are not the mercenary class which it has been rather too much the fashion of late to say they are; but that they can do and will do their work earnestly and well, bound by considerations of honour and duty, and not merely by pay’ (J.A. Chessar, *Educational Paper of the Home and Colonial School Society*).

Universal Basic Elementary Education: Giving Evidence to the London School Board (June 1871)

‘Home and Colonial Schools were mixed throughout (which she preferred) ... This plan stimulated the two sexes to rival or surpass each other. They did not play together, but simply met in class. Her experience was to the effect that the manners of the girls did not deteriorate by association with the boys... large classes could never be taught so effectively as small ones... to teach reading or arithmetic to a class of 50 or 60 infants, she thought would be almost impossible... that number would be managed very well in gallery lessons... children had lessons on food, but cookery was not taught practically, it not being considered a legitimate subject of the school, but to be learned at home.’

Educational Reformer: Election Address for the London School Board (1873)

‘For twenty years I have been practically engaged in education – during the greater part of that time in training teachers of Public Elementary Schools at the Home and Colonial College, Gray’s Inn Road. I may, therefore, claim to have a large experience in the kind of education which it is the business of School Boards to extend. If I should be elected, the knowledge which I have thus gained may, I hope, be of service. Your choice of Mrs Anderson at the last election showed that you desired to secure the co-operation of women in carrying out the Elementary Education Act; and it seems reasonable to expect that the education of girls at any rate may best be promoted by the presence of women as members of the Board. I am of opinion that the benefits of education should be extended to all, and that a parent has no more right to starve the mind than to neglect the physical wants of his child. I am therefore in favour of compulsion in those cases where it is necessary. As a teacher I have found that the “religious difficulty”, is rarely a cause of embarrassment in schools. But, while I am decidedly in favour of scriptural instruction, I think it ought to be of an entirely unsectarian character. Should you do me the honour to elect me, I shall feel it my duty to give the necessary time and attention to the work with which I may be entrusted.’

Educational Writer: *On Teaching Geography* (1879)

‘If younger teachers will but remember the nature of children and will follow the possibilities of their subject; if they will make and keep it fresh to themselves and their pupils, they will find... the teaching of Geography is one of the most interesting occupations in the world. NOTE. – I have been asked to add that accurate committing to memory of lists of names... must be insisted on... children should be “heard” these things in the old-fashioned, thorough way.’

Professional Memory: Legacy

‘The women teachers regarded her especially as their friend, and she was elected as their representative on the Council of the College of Preceptors, the Kindergarten College, that for the Training of Teachers for Higher Grade Schools, and Cheltenham Ladies College’ (*The Queen*, 11 September 1880).

‘She was identified with every important movement for the higher education of women, the training of teachers, and the spread of sanitary knowledge among all classes. But, in advocating a high mental culture for her sex, she was not one-sided. She never lost sight of the necessity for the domestic training of girls. She helped to organise classes for needlework and cookery... her work has this special feature - she widened the sphere of female education by showing that scientific subjects can be made interesting and practically useful to girls of average intelligence; and she opened a new field of labour to highly cultivated women, by proving that such subjects can be taught, and admirably taught, by a woman. She was a true friend to teachers, and many who are now happily employed in congenial work, owe their present position chiefly to her good advice, and to her untiring efforts to find useful and remunerative employment for those whom she thought properly qualified’ (*Educational Times*, 1 October 1880).

Jane Martin, ‘Making Good Teachers. Politics, Policy-making, and Practice in Teacher Education from the 19th century to the Present’, (Society for Educational Studies, 2023-4).

<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/education/research/projects/making-good-teachers>.

Email: j.martin@bham.ac.uk