

Beale, Dorothea

(1831–1906)

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Dorothea Beale (1831–1906)

by G. H. Martyn & Sons

Beale, Dorothea (1831–1906), headmistress, was born in London on 21 March 1831 at 41 Bishopsgate Street Within, the fourth child and third daughter of the eleven children of Miles Beale (*d.* 1862) and Dorothea Margaret Complin (*d.* 1881).

Family and education

Miles Beale came from a Gloucestershire family but spent most of his life as a doctor in London. His high-church views made a deep and lasting impression on Dorothea as did his love of English literature, particularly of Shakespeare, a subject on which he delivered lectures at Crosby Hall, Chelsea, which she attended. He was also probably responsible for the business competence which was so noticeable in her later career. Miles was concerned that his daughters receive the best education then available for women and was an interested and enthusiastic supporter both of his daughter's later aspirations and of the improvement in women's education in general. Four of his daughters became teachers.

Dorothea Beale's mother, who was descended from a French Huguenot family, was a cousin of the feminist Caroline Cornwallis, whose views were influential in the Beale family. Consequently, when Dorothea showed an early interest in books and study she was encouraged to develop it. Mrs Beale took pains to find a competent governess, no easy task at that time, and subsequently a school with a reputation above the average, even though in later years her daughter remembered chiefly its limited syllabus and the rote learning. She left the school at thirteen and for the next three years educated herself at home, drawing on the libraries of the London Institute and Crosby Hall, and what she learned from her mother's sister. Inspired by reading the life of Pascal she set herself to reading Euclid in the original Greek, an experience which she later claimed made her realize the value of original research and of systematic teaching. In 1847 Dorothea and her two elder sisters were sent to Mrs Bray's school for English girls in Paris. She felt that the quality of her study at home was much superior and she hated the rigid routine. The experience was short-lived as the girls were brought home on the outbreak of the 1848 revolution. In the same year, the Governesses' Benevolent Institution extended its activities by opening Queen's College, Harley Street, London. Dorothea and her sisters were among the first to attend lectures there. Over the next few years she received diplomas certifying her ability to teach most of the subjects learned by girls at that time. Within a year she was herself teaching mathematics there. She also continued her study of Greek, a language which she loved for its association with both the New Testament and the philosophy of Plato.

In 1854 Dorothea Beale was asked to teach Latin to the junior class at Queen's College and accepted the post of head teacher of the preparatory school. She was only twenty-three, so the appointment is both a measure of her talents and of the lack of well-trained, experienced teachers. During this period she visited schools in Germany and Switzerland, adopting methods of teaching mathematics which she observed there. She also published an account of the activities of the deaconesses at Kaiserwerth. At the end of 1856 she resigned from Queen's, unhappy with the management of the school, which was in the hands of the dean, Charles Grenfell Nicolay, of whose educational policies she did not approve. Immediately she accepted the post of head teacher in the Clergy Daughters' School at Casterton, Westmorland, the model for Charlotte Brontë's Lowood. This was a mistake and she left after barely a year, being out of sympathy with the strict Calvinistic regime and unable to bear the strain of teaching a wide syllabus to her usual high standard. In the first half of 1858 she wrote *The Student's Text-Book of English and General History* (6th edn, 1862), intended for the use of teachers. It was written in response to an outcry over the alleged Romanizing tendencies in the new edition of Henry Ince's standard school textbook and to meet the need for something other than the catechisms and abridgements so common in girls' schools. Together with her subsequent *The Student's Chronological Maps* (1863) it enjoyed great popularity until superseded by more up-to-date works. It set a new standard in the teaching of the subject by placing the important facts of English history in a coherent order and in the context of European history. It extended the notion of history to cover events up to the mid-nineteenth century, although subsequent editions were not updated. While considering her future, Dorothea Beale was also teaching at a school in Barnes run by her sister Eliza and Miss Elwall. Although careers in social work were suggested to her, there was no doubt in her mind that her life should be devoted to teaching girls and she applied for several headships.

Cheltenham Ladies' College

In June 1858 Dorothea Beale was elected principal of Cheltenham Ladies' College, a post which she held until her death. The college had been founded in 1854 by a group of Cheltenham residents wishing to provide, at a reasonable price, an education that did not sacrifice learning to accomplishments and would fit its pupils for their later domestic roles. Founded on the same proprietary system as Cheltenham College it was, and remained for some years, primarily a day school, socially exclusive, taking children from the age of five, initially including small boys. From the start it was envisaged that there would be some form of external examination annually and strict discipline in the classroom, reinforced by a rule of silence. When Dorothea Beale took up her post the school was on the verge of collapse, with a falling roll, little money, and leasehold premises available only for the next two years. The school survived only by the exercise of the strictest economy and reorganization of its finances in 1860. It was hard to find properly qualified staff, a problem which persisted until pupils trained in the school were available for employment.

Parental prejudices had to be taken into account and Miss Beale, always moderate and diplomatic in her approach to changes, initially accepted that mathematics should not be part of the syllabus because parents objected to their girls learning boys' subjects. Much scientific knowledge had to be smuggled into the syllabus through physical geography and more emphasis was placed on 'accomplishments' than she would have liked. Latin was replaced by German, which Miss Beale considered to be equal in value as a mental training, quite apart from her conviction that Latin literature was

unsuitable for young girls. For many years she did much of the teaching herself, her particular strengths being history, English, and, when it was finally introduced in 1868, mathematics. History and English literature were taught with what has been described as a puritan regard for the moral lessons to be learned from the deeds of particular role models. Her *Great Englishmen: Short Lives* published in 1881 is a series of such moral portraits. Many of her lectures on Dante, a particular love of hers, Chaucer, Spenser, and other writers were essays concentrating on the moral and spiritual virtues of Beatrice, Britomart, or Griselda, who were held up as examples to the girls. When she reduced her teaching duties, giving way to younger teachers educated with different priorities, she continued to express her views through religious instruction, which she never gave up and which replaced the sermons of boys' schools' headmasters, and through a steady stream of papers and articles, mainly published in the college magazine, which she edited for many years.

Whatever the initial limitations of the syllabus, Dorothea Beale's methods ensured that her pupils were successful. She insisted on regular testing to ensure that information had been properly learned and understood. All work had to be marked and initialled by teachers, the pupils then correcting their errors on a fresh page. Although she was not in favour of competitive examinations for girls on the pattern of those then taken by boys, she ensured from the first that there were annual examinations on their work by external examiners, many of them Oxford dons, to ensure that high standards were maintained and, incidentally, that the school's successful programme was broadcast throughout the educational world. Her strong personality, sense of purpose, and deeply held faith impressed both girls and parents. Numbers rose steadily, and within ten years of her appointment the school was well launched.

The education of girls

Beale's success commanded attention and on 19 April 1866 she gave evidence before the schools inquiry commission (the Taunton commission) as one of a few leading women educationists, mobilized by Emily Davies, to appear as witnesses before the commissioners. The publication of the commission's report (December 1867) was a turning point both for the education of girls and for Dorothea Beale. For the first time the gross inadequacies of most girls' schools were exposed in reports written by men, who included Liberal young dons, such as James Bryce and T. H. Green, committed to the extension of high quality education for both sexes. The climate of opinion engendered by the commission encouraged Dorothea Beale to publish articles expounding her own views on the education of middle-class girls. In 1865 she read a paper at the Bristol Social Science Congress explaining the proprietary school arrangements of the college. This was followed by an article in *Fraser's Magazine* (October 1866) in which she tackled the question of the medical fitness of girls to study and sit exams in the same way as their brothers. She also arranged for the sections on women's education in the Taunton commission report to be published separately (1869), at her own expense, prefaced by her analysis of the problems and their solutions. Here she argued for the release of middle-class girls from 'the tyranny of custom' which forced them to enter either 'a daily round of unceasing visiting and frivolous busy-ness' or to 'cast off the yoke, not of these alone, but of wholesome custom, of lawful authority'. Women had been freed from the drudgery of household tasks by the progress of modern science and technology, so they should be properly taught, using modern textbooks, to use and cultivate their minds in order to become civilized and spiritually enriched. She countered the arguments used by parents and doctors that such study was in any way morally or physically harmful and then outlined in some detail a programme of study based upon her own experiences and achievements at Cheltenham.

In the next fifteen years the college expanded and prospered. During this period Miss Beale provided new, permanent accommodation for the school with proper boarding facilities, and improved both staffing and syllabus. By 1880 Cheltenham Ladies' College was teaching a full syllabus including mathematics and classics. It was to continue growing in size and in functions throughout the decade. Miss Beale had long recognized the need for properly trained teachers. Her solution was to encourage capable pupils to enter the teaching profession and to found in 1876 a small boarding-house for pupil teachers who could not afford the Cheltenham fees. In 1885 this was reconstituted as St Hilda's College, Cheltenham. She had hoped that the guild of old girls would fund this project, but it chose instead to start a settlement in the East End of London, a scheme in which she took little interest. St Hilda's College, Cheltenham, provided many of the teachers for the college, who were encouraged, when it became possible, to study for London University degrees. She also revived the preparatory section, which had not long survived the original foundation of the college. Organized on the principles of Pestalozzi and Froebel, it was instituted in 1883, one of the first of its kind in the country. By the end of the century it was possible to spend one's entire life at Cheltenham from the age of five through to retirement from the staff. The school had become a community of over 1000, linked to many other schools at home and abroad, and teaching children from preparatory level right through to university degrees. Her methods were encapsulated in *Work and Play in Girls' Schools* (1898), to which Miss Soulsby and Miss Dove, headmistresses who had taught at Cheltenham, contributed sections on the moral aspects of education and on sport respectively. Dorothea never took much interest in sport, while recognizing the need for 'rational' exercise of some kind. But, always open to well-argued proposals and aware that in some respects her own views were increasingly regarded as conservative, even out of date, she made provision for it in the 1890s.

The basic principles and aims of Miss Beale's educational system remained, at the end of her life, much the same as they had been at the beginning. For her education was a means to personal fulfilment without the object of earning a living. It had a deeply religious content and motivation; it was the way towards a fuller understanding of God and his works, in itself justification enough for its pursuit. She believed that everybody had talents which it was their duty to develop as far as they were able and then to use to their best ability. In most cases this would be within the context of family life, but for the exceptionally able or for those who had to earn their living it would be in the teaching profession and other fields which were opening up to women as the century progressed. The fully developed syllabus catered for the middle-class girl destined for marriage and motherhood, but also for the talented scholar. The main point was that all should be able to do their duty to the best of their ability and not waste time on frivolous, unprofitable pursuits, summed up in the one dismissive word 'accomplishments'. But, unlike some of her contemporaries, Miss Beale always assumed that most of her girls would not have to earn a living and she was therefore never in favour of placing girls on the same footing as boys. Consequently, she was always opposed to competitive examinations but she did not stop able girls from sitting them. She encouraged her girls to pursue higher education through the college, in preference to Oxford and Cambridge, where women were fighting for equal treatment with men. But she did not discourage the ablest women from going to Oxford and Cambridge. She was always ready to recognize and nurture exceptional talent; her ground rules were designed for the majority who were not so gifted.

Despite her preference for St Hilda's College, Cheltenham, Dorothea Beale already had plans for a college in Oxford in the 1880s. Her intention was that it should be for Cheltenham girls and staff who wished to spend a year pursuing leisurely research and reading without necessarily taking any examinations. The scheme was vigorously resisted by the heads of the other women's colleges, who felt it would devalue their efforts to establish the right of women to take degrees. But in 1893 St Hilda's Hall was opened. Miss Beale's original intentions were soon forgotten, most of the students taking examinations. After the first few years she took little part in the academic affairs of the college but maintained strict financial control, for she had personally provided the funds for its establishment in much the same way as she had for many of the Ladies' College boarding-houses. She never fully understood or sympathized with the aspirations of the heads of the other women's colleges. St Hilda's College, Oxford, never had for her the same importance as Cheltenham Ladies' College. On her death she left it only its furnishings, paid for by herself, and £500, leaving the bulk of her estate, £55,000, to the Ladies' College.

Influence and reputation

As the reputation of the Ladies' College spread Miss Beale became involved in the development of women's education more generally. She was one of the founder members of the Association of Head Mistresses, which began with a membership of eight in 1874 but had over 230 members by the end of her life. She took an increasingly active part in educational conferences in England, Europe, and the United States, developing contacts throughout the world. She was approached for help and advice in setting up and staffing girls' schools elsewhere. Although she confined her energies largely to educational matters she had contacts in the women's movement. She was a member of the [Kensington Society](#) and she supported both women's suffrage and Josephine Butler's campaign against child prostitution. Her achievements were recognized by a request to give evidence to the royal commission on secondary education (the Bryce commission) in 1894, by numerous invitations to attend conferences and public functions, and, in 1902, by the award of an LLD at Edinburgh University.

Dorothea Beale had, as a headmistress, the same status and role in girls' education as Arnold of Rugby or Thring of Uppingham had in that of boys. At the start of her career, as she often said, education for girls was superficial and inadequate. Middle-class girls were more ignorant than working-class girls who attended state-funded elementary schools. Her generation had to fight for the right to study 'boys' subjects' and to sit examinations. They also had to establish the governess as a respected, professional teacher. In both these endeavours she played a leading and distinctive role. In the development of the Ladies' College as an institution she demonstrated an exceptional capacity for financial management and control which enabled her to weather bad times and to extend the college buildings from one modest house to a large Gothic pile architecturally much influenced by Ruskin, whom she admired and who approved her aspirations. But her administrative skills were accompanied by a personality expressing ideals and aspirations which deeply impressed her pupils. She liked her pupils to talk of her 'marriage' to the college, as if she were a nun, and at one time contemplated setting up a secular religious teaching order. Her faith was central to her life even when, in middle age, she suffered from doubts. Her scripture lessons, conducted amid absolute silence, were remembered with awe as much for the beauty of her speaking voice as for the emotional charge she imparted to her teaching. Though in later years her teaching role decreased, she never permitted anything to diminish her pastoral role. She had the knack of knowing what was going on and a presence in the classroom which was felt even if she was not there. Her manner of dealing with the lawbreaker was quiet but devastating. 'You must never let a child have the satisfaction of holding out against you', she advised young teachers. She sometimes spoke her mind with a frankness bordering on brutality. Personally reserved, austere, small in stature, and dignified, she was in later life often likened to Queen Victoria. But despite her shyness, she developed some strong friendships with former pupils and in times of trouble could always be relied on for practical or spiritual help and much kindness.

Dorothea Beale died on 9 November 1906 in a nursing home at 5 Royal Parade, Cheltenham, following an operation for cancer. After cremation in Birmingham, her ashes were interred on 16 November in Gloucester Cathedral at a ceremony attended by virtually the whole college.

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- J. J. Shannon, oils, 1904, Cheltenham Ladies' College
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- J. E. Hyett, marble bust, Cheltenham Ladies' College
- G. H. Martyn & Sons, photogravure, NPG [\[see illus.\]](#)
- F. Meyer, miniature, Cheltenham Ladies' College
- E. Stirling, plaster bust, St Hilda's College, Oxford
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Wealth at Death

£74,106 10s. 8d.: probate, 22 Dec 1906