

Bryant [*née* Willock], Sophie

(1850–1922)

- <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/37237>
- Published in print: 23 September 2004
- Published online: 23 September 2004
-



Sophie Bryant (1850–1922)

by W. & D. Downey, pubd 1894

Bryant [*née* Willock], Sophie (1850–1922), educationist and suffragist, was born in Sandymount, near Dublin, on 15 February 1850, the third of the six children of the Revd William Alexander Willock, fellow of Trinity College, Dublin, mathematician, and his wife, daughter of J. P. Morris of Skreen Castle. As a child she was mainly taught by her father, but in 1866, three years after the family moved to England, she won a scholarship to Bedford College, London. The Cambridge local examinations had only just been opened to girls, and her performance in mathematics placed her alone in the first class. She married in 1869, but her husband, Dr William Hicks Bryant, died the next year. In 1875 she was appointed to teach mathematics by Frances Buss of the North London Collegiate School. The conventional view that this was not a subject for girls was challenged by Sophie Bryant's success, notably in sending a succession of North Londoners to study mathematics at Girton. She worked at the same time for her own degree and in 1881 took a BSc (London), gaining a first in mental and moral science and a second in mathematics. Three years later she became the first woman to be awarded a DSc.

George Bernard Shaw, a friend of her youth, remembered Sophie as having a sunny and engaging personality; and this personal warmth, combined with intellect, moral purpose, culture, and commitment to making girls think, launched her as an outstanding teacher, Frances Buss's right hand and natural successor. By the time she herself became headmistress of the North London in 1895 she was well known in wider circles, as a member of the London county council's technical education board and of the Bryce commission on secondary education, and as the author of *Educational Ends* (1887) and of many articles in journals of education and philosophy. She was an apostle of teacher training, and as the first woman to be elected to the senate of London University promoted the foundation of the London Day Training College and the accompanying chair in education.

'Ireland was in the heart of her heart', said Sir Michael E. Sadler, and Sophie Bryant always felt a touch of the exile's longing. A Gladstonian Liberal, she backed home rule, pressing that cause among English people. In Ireland she heartened the embryonic movement for the higher education of women by personally securing the involvement in it of the Roman Catholic convent-school nuns. Three of her ten books were about Ireland, and she was awarded in 1904 an honorary DLitt from Dublin University.

Bryant's feeling for freedom as 'the condition of all development' infused her teaching, her patriotism, and her support for women's suffrage. In Hampstead she was president of the local committee of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. She took great delight in physical freedom, was one of the first women to cycle, loved to row, and climbed the Matterhorn twice. She retired in 1918. On holiday in 1922 she disappeared, climbing alone near Chamonix. Her death is recorded as having taken place on 14 August 1922. After a search her body was found on 28 August 1922.

Sources

- S. Burstall and others, *Sophie Bryant D.Sc, Litt.D, 1850–1922* (privately printed, 1922)
- E. Doorly, 'Mrs Bryant', *The North London Collegiate School, 1850–1950*, ed. R. M. Scrimgeour (1950)

Likenesses

- W. & D. Downey, photograph, pubd 1894, NPG [\[see illus.\]](#)

Wealth at Death

£11,676 19s. 8d.: probate, 10 Nov 1922, *CGPLA Eng. & Wales*