

Useful Ornaments Form and Function at Demill Ladies' College

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Article abstract

The Reverend Demill opened his boarding school, Demill Ladies' College in Oshawa, Ontario, in 1876 to offer higher education to young girls in a non-denominational setting. Demill's vision, to offer a superior educational experience to ensure young women became useful members of society, draws into question the form and function of female education in the late 19th century. This article assesses the curriculum, faculty, moral environment and student success at Demill Ladies College to determine if an education at Demill was supporting the expected role of women in the private sphere or did it provide opportunity for young ladies to pursue opportunities in the public sphere.

Useful Ornaments

Form and Function at Demill Ladies' College

By Laura Suchan

*There is a little silver pin,
Where e'er I see, it makes me grin.
For all the merry, jolly days
Rise up around me as I gaze.
And I shall hear be it ever so long
The strains of each rousing college song
And I think I hear as I dream the while
The tenor voice of our dear old Lyle.*

Your school friend Clara Meggs
Gananoque December 14, 1887
(From the autograph album of Lila Easton
Demill College graduate class of 1888)¹

Clara Meggs and Lila Easton were two of the students pursuing an advanced education at Demill Ladies' College (DLC) in Oshawa, Ontario. Demill Ladies College was founded by Methodist minister Reverend A.B. De Mille (De Mille used an original spelling of the family name for his surname) and opened in 1876, at a time when there was an increasing desire amongst the middle classes for more educational opportunities for their daughters.² The purpose of

the College, as articulated in the 1881-1882 school calendar, was to bring the higher branches of education within the reach of the largest possible number of young girls. As women began to attend secondary schools in increasing numbers, ladies' colleges provided an alternative to the public school system, particularly for parents wishing a segregated learning environment for their daughters. The importance of these institutions in the educational history of women in On-

¹ Lila Easton, autograph album, in the collection of the Oshawa Community Museum

² De Mille explains in his publication *In the Net* that his ancestors were Huguenots and during a later period the surname was spelled incorrectly as De Mill. He decided to use the original form of his name which was De Mille. The school name according to the calendars was Demill and so when referring to the school I use this spelling.

Abstract

The Reverend Demill opened his boarding school, Demill Ladies' College in Oshawa, Ontario, in 1876 to offer higher education to young girls in a non-denominational setting. Demill's vision, to offer a superior educational experience to ensure young women became useful members of society, draws into question the form and function of female education in the late 19th century. This article assesses the curriculum, faculty, moral environment and student success at Demill Ladies College to determine if an education at Demill was supporting the expected role of women in the private sphere or did it provide opportunity for young ladies to pursue opportunities in the public sphere.

Résumé: *En 1876, le révérend Demill a fondé son internat, le Demill Ladies' College à Oshawa, en Ontario, afin d'offrir un enseignement supérieur aux jeunes filles dans un environnement non confessionnel. La vision de Demill – une éducation permettant aux jeunes femmes d'être utiles en société – remet en question la forme et la fonction de l'éducation des femmes à la fin du 19e siècle. Dans cet article, nous allons évaluer le curriculum, le corps enseignant, l'environnement et sa moralité et le succès étudiant au Demill Ladies' College pour déterminer si une éducation à Demill supportait le rôle des femmes dans la vie privée ou si elle permettait une carrière publique.*

tario is indicated by the increase in well funded female day and boarding schools in the province from one or two in 1860s to seven or eight by the mid 1880s.³ The wealthy class could afford tutors for their daughters but for the middle class, the ladies' colleges proliferating in the province were a viable alternative.⁴ During the 1840s and 1850s in Oshawa there were at least three private ladies schools catering to daughters of the middle class. Miss Wheeler, a graduate and former teacher at the Burlington Ladies' Academy, left her position as a common school teacher to operate a ladies' boarding school. By all accounts Miss Wheeler's school was well regarded and in 1851 she is reported to have 95 girls on the school roster studying grammar, writing, geography and history.⁵ Very little is known of the other early ladies schools in Oshawa. Miss Leonard, a pianist, was running a school and Mrs. Dayman's school was based on the English Dame School system and offered lessons in sewing and manners.⁶

The Reverend De Mille's fervent desire was to open a female boarding school that was unencumbered with influence from a particular denomination

³ R.D. Gindey and W.P.J. Miller, *Inventing Secondary Education: The Rise of the High School in Nineteenth Century Ontario*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's, 1990), 295.

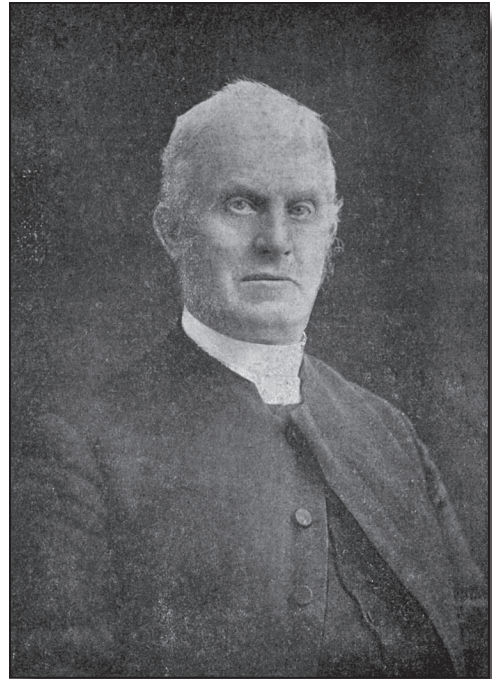
⁴ Bert Boggende, "Alone in the Province": The Cobourg Ladies' Seminary-Burlington Ladies' Academy, 1842-1851," *Ontario History*, 89:1 (March 1997), 56

⁵ Education fonds, Oshawa Community Museum

⁶ Douglas Ross, *Education in Oshawa* (Oshawa: Oshawa Board of Education, 1970), 11

The Reverend A.B. De Mille, Methodist minister and founder of Demill Ladies' College.

and would offer Protestant parents a viable educational alternative to Catholic convent schools for their daughters. That De Mille succeeded is reflected in the many accolades appearing in the local papers praising the school including the *Toronto Mail* which asked the question "... whether in the Dominion of Canada today, a home for young women can be found equal to that offered in the Demill College, whether it be considered educationally, socially, morally or religiously."⁷ Indeed the father of one of Demill's students, worrying himself about the state of female education in the province, was delighted to have a suitable place for his daughter to be educated, "I looked upon present style of education of young ladies as wrong and have endeavored to teach our daughters such requirements as may render them not only ornamental but also useful members of society."⁸ This sentiment, to make useful members of society, was shared by De Mille who often felt that much of the education of girls (particularly education in Convent schools) was useless and would lead to females being ill prepared to raise good Christian children, "What good would it do to have a daughter educated at a fancy academy if she couldn't cook a meal for her family when she was finished?" asked the Reverend De Mille. This question of form versus function in female schools assesses the academic usefulness of the



female colleges. To what extent did these schools function as training facilities for women in a vocational respect or was their purpose more to provide an ornamental education intended to maintain gender roles by preparing women to assume roles in the domestic sphere? When the Reverend De Mille promised to make his school accessible to the largest possible number of young ladies, was his intention to train them for roles as wives and mothers or to offer them an opportunity to train for vocations in the public sphere?

This question of the form and function of female education in the late nineteenth century prompts a closer look at DLC, its moral environment, curriculum,

⁷ Toronto Mail, 26 June 1886

⁸ De Mille Ladies College Annual Calendar, 1881-1882, p. 20



Demill Ladies' College in Oshawa, during its heyday.

faculty and the graduates themselves. With many female colleges appearing in the province what made the Reverend De Mille so confident his educational vision was superior to that being offered at other schools? What quality of education was offered at DLC? What was its purpose? Surviving archival sources cannot provide full answers to these questions but some conclusions may be drawn from De Mille's own writings, newspaper accounts, and annual school calendars, and from tracing the graduates.

The founder and President of DLC,

Alford Byron De Mille, was born in 1832 in New Connexion, Ontario to Isaac, a farmer, and Amelia De Mille. Alfred remained on the farm until he was 15 at which time he started a tin, stove and hardware business in nearby Shannonville, Ontario. He attended Victoria College in Cobourg for a short period and soon after became a Methodist minister in 1863. De Mille travelled a circuit preaching and was active in the "conversion of sinners."⁹ It was during his time on the traveling circuit, that De Mille says he began to give some thought to starting his own school,

⁹ *The Canadian Album Men of Canada*, Volume 2, (Brantford: Bradley Garetson and Company, 1893), 29 <<http://archive.org/details/canadianalbummen02cochuoft>>

the purpose of female education in general and more specifically, about the best ways to educate girls. He travelled extensively visiting female schools and spent considerable time honing his vision of his school. One of the main concerns expressed by De Mille was the lack of choice for Protestant parents who often felt sending their daughters to a convent school was the only feasible option for education. De Mille felt it was his duty to enlighten parents as to the true purpose of these Convent schools, stating

It was one of the objects of the Church of Rome, in establishing convent schools, to bring Protestant girls as far as possible under the influence of the Church. Many who do not know may not understand how extensively the young are influenced while attending these schools.¹⁰

Therefore to save parents from the grief of having their daughters join the Catholic church or, worse yet, enter the convent, De Mille felt impelled to begin a school of his own to fill this gap.

I determined in some way to devote the rest of my life to seeking to rescue young Protestant girls from a similar danger [says De Mille], I did not wish to do so. It puzzled me to explain why I should abandon a life of usefulness to plunge into the untried difficulties that would surely meet me; yet I could not but brood in bitterness of soul over the

fate of those young girls.¹¹

De Mille noted that his congregation tried to talk him out of the idea, "It grieved me much to reject the advice offered by my brethren in the ministry and the admonitions of many friends but I dared not disregard the commands of the Master."¹²

The Reverend De Mille knew what kind of school he wished to start and, in 1873, he arrived in Oshawa and sought to bring the school and his vision, to fruition. He requested a \$3 000 bonus from the Town of Oshawa to purchase the necessary land for his school and, in return, De Mille promised to operate the school for at least ten years with fifty students a year operating for nine months of the year.¹³ De Mille's request for a bonus sparked a great deal of discussion, debate and even some dissension in the village. The *Ontario Reformer* newspaper was vocal in its opposition to not only granting the bonus but to the school as well, writing at one point, "the scheme is absurd in all its bearings: and those pressing for its recognition are only raising a stumbling block to other matters much more feasible and of far greater moment."¹⁴ Ultimately De Mille was successful in his plea and was granted the bonus on 6 October 1873, after which he began preparations for the building of his school.¹⁵

Construction of the building was

¹⁰ Reverend A.B. De Mille, *In the Net* (London: Morgan and Scott Ltd., 1910), 23

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 16

¹² *Ibid.*, 20

¹³ Douglas Ross, *Education in Oshawa* (Oshawa: Oshawa Board of education, 1970), 155

¹⁴ *Ontario Reformer*, 28 March 1873

¹⁵ Why did De Mille chose Oshawa for the location of his female school? In the surviving records

underway in early 1875.¹⁶ Gas and water tank pipes were installed and later steam heating was added. All the public rooms were said to be lit by gas with coal oil lamps used in the private areas. By October 1875 the building was completed and the school was described as being a “large and commodious building, supplied with all the modern improvements in heating, lighting and ventilation.”¹⁷ It was quite a narrow building, 150 feet long, with two storeys and a mansard roof. There was a large balcony on the south side of the building. The interior rooms were noted to be “large and airy with high ceilings and well lit.”¹⁸ The architecture of the building was described as being “quite ugly” however it was said the ornamental trees and shrubs helped hide the unsightliness of the building.¹⁹

DLC opened on 1 February 1876 with eighty students. The school’s twenty acres of land were perched on a hill in south Oshawa, giving a commanding view from all sides,

On the south is the broad expanse

of the blue waters of Ontario, on the east is a splendid view of Oshawa, with its fine manufacturing establishments, and on the west and north an extended prospect of the country with beautiful valleys and sloping hills and beautifully dotted with the homes of yeomanry, all of which present a most enchanting scene.²⁰

As described in the 1881-1882 school calendar, the purpose of Demill Ladies’ College was to “bring the higher branches of education within the reach of the largest possible number of young girls and to add a high mental and aesthetic culture.”²¹ De Mille believed his school gave “superior advantages educationally”²² and wished to give “Demill the very front rank amongst educational institutions in this country.” Robert Gidney and Wyn Millar have provided a definition for superior education for females and how this differed from the education boys received. Girls were required to take academic subjects such as reading and mathematics but added to this was training in various ornamental

there is no rationale put forth by him or any one other to suggest a reason. Perhaps it was De Mille’s personal life that helped him to decide. Archival records indicate he married Lucilla Hurd of nearby Whitby, Ontario in 1854. The 1851 census lists Lucilla’s father, Elizir, as a clothier and her mother, Phebe, and five siblings. Perhaps it was these family connections and familiarity with the area that influenced his decision.

¹⁶ Unfortunately there is not much known about the construction of the school. What little information we do have comes from the unpublished notes of Olive French who researched the history of education in Oshawa. Ms. French conducted her research prior to the fire that destroyed the *Oshawa Times* newspaper collection. Olive French’s notes and manuscript are available in the Oshawa Community Archives.

¹⁷ Olive French, unpublished manuscript, Oshawa Community Archives

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Susan Houston and Alison Prentice, *Schooling and Scholars in 19th Century Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 226.

²¹ De Mille Ladies College Annual Calendar, 1881-1882, p. 4

²² *Ibid.*

subjects including needlework, French, art and music. Ornamental subjects, it was suggested, were designed to prepare women for roles within the domestic or private sphere as homemakers, wives, and mothers responsible for the moral well being of society.²³ Gidney and Millar are quick to point out the function of the ornamental branches was not to procure a vocation because after all most women in the nineteenth century were not employed but instead were a contributing factor in maintaining gender inequalities. However the accomplishments curriculum should be defined separately on its own terms and not compared to what the boys were learning.²⁴

Private schools that charged tuition or had denominational funding were able to provide a substantial accomplishment curriculum, something that the public schools were not. Gidney and Miller argue the ornamental and solid subjects were taken in combination at a ladies' college and the availability and extent of the accomplishments offered is one defining element of a private school education for girls.²⁵ In the ladies' college, "few of the students... took only academic subjects and more than 90% carry side by side with the prescribed course a very liberal course in music and art."²⁶ Once the girls began

to enter the co-educational high schools the ornamental curriculum did not follow but instead was replaced by subjects which counted towards university matriculation exams. Courses such as art and music were left to suffer on the periphery and others such as domestic science for the most part were left out of the curriculum totally. Gidney and Miller argue what replaced the accomplishment curriculum was by no means a quality curriculum.²⁷

Johanna Selles-Rhoney finds that the purpose of Alma College cannot be defined as only preparing women for roles in the domestic sphere. She agrees that the main stated function of these colleges was to prepare women for their future roles as wives and mothers, however vocational training might also be considered as a secondary function.²⁸ Although the school's declared intention was to provide training for women to succeed in roles within the domestic sphere, the student's course preferences and graduation figures clearly show a tendency towards diplomas which at least offered some prospect of employment. By 1900, graduation figures indicated students overwhelmingly chose subjects leading to diplomas in music (46), elocution (43), and commerce (49) as opposed to degrees such as Mistress of English Lit-

²³ R.D. Gidney and W.P.J. Miller, *Inventing Secondary Education: The Rise of the High School in Nineteenth Century Ontario* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's, 1990), 16.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Johanna Selles-Rhoney, "'Manners or Morals? Or Men in Petticoats?' Education and Alma College, 1871-1898" in *Gender and Education in Ontario* (Toronto: Scholar's Press, 1991), 250.

erature (35), Mistress of Liberal arts (12) or Domestic Science (8).²⁹ Other opportunities included continuing study at the Ontario School of Art or in Europe or the United States, an option several students apparently chose.

Principal B.F. Austin of Alma College was also a strong advocate of educating women for not only the private sphere but also to assume a more public role. He firmly believed not all women were destined to marry and should therefore have the ability to earn a living. Austin envisioned women working in many non-traditional roles including art teaching, design, art work, civil service and even medicine. Selles-Rhoney argues that although his views reflected the type of education available at Alma College he was still able to satisfy the parents who believed in the primacy of the domestic sphere and from whom the majority of the school funding came.³⁰

Selles Rhoney further explores the history of Methodist education from the beginnings of the female department of the Upper Canada Academy to the Church Union in 1925 which effectively ended Methodist education.³¹ She considers how religious and gender ideology shaped education, particularly curricula, at several ladies' colleges including Alma College in St. Thomas, Ontario Ladies' College in Whitby, and Wesleyan Ladies'

College in Hamilton. She asserts these colleges functioned as training centres for employment, especially teacher training.³² Although not defined specifically as training schools, Methodist colleges enabled some women to pursue vocational training opportunities in teaching, business, domestic science, elocution, music and the commercial arts. The availability of diplomas in elocution, commerce and the domestic science in itself reflects a practical or useful orientation to studies.³³ She also points to studies of similar academies in the United States which show that the option for training in vocations, particularly teaching, was an important function of these schools.

Bert den Boggende echoes these sentiments when he surveys Cobourg Ladies' Seminary's Burlington Ladies' Academy 1842-1851. This was one of two female educational facilities which splintered from the Cobourg Ladies' Seminary Upper Canada Academy when it went from a coeducational facility to a male only facility in 1841. The Reverend Daniel Van Norman placed great emphasis on the quality of the curriculum to ensure it was at least equal, if not superior, to the curriculum offered at Victoria College. Van Norman even offered instruction in the Classics which during the 1840s was generally not accessible to female students.³⁴ The scope of the facilities available, the

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 261.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Johanna Selles, *Methodists and Women's Education in Ontario 1836-1925* (McGill-Queen's University Press: Montreal, 1996) 217.

³² *Ibid.*, 218.

³³ *Ibid.*, 219.

³⁴ Boggende, "Alone in the Province," 61.

extent of the curriculum, and the high standards set, meant the Academy was without parallel in female education during its time.

Boggende does challenge the comments by Gidney and Millar that study in the ornamental and solid subjects went hand in hand. He uses as an example, an account by a student that she studied arithmetic, grammar, geography, reading, writing, spelling and English composition. He felt this illustrated, at least in the case of Burlington Ladies' Academy, that ornamental subjects were studied once a common English program was successfully completed.³⁵ He further argues that the ornamental branch of study was not viewed as frivolous but taken very seriously, as evidenced by the large tract of time set aside for instruction in these subjects. The public school system in the 1840s was not offering an arts curriculum, therefore the Ladies' colleges provided the only opportunity for study in these subjects. Burlington Ladies' Academy went further than some schools in actually advertising its vocational preparedness courses, specifically teacher training. In fact the 1849 catalogue offered special attention for girls wishing to go into teaching.³⁶

Boggende further addresses the type and purpose of the education received by the females within the context of a co-educational facility at Cobourg's Upper

Canada Academy. His work affords an unique opportunity to compare the curriculum of both males and females at the same private school. He suggests girls had access to most of the same courses as the boys except for the classics. Where most of the difference occurs is the ornamental courses which appeared to only be available to the girls.³⁷

Boggende draws several connections between the changing views towards women and society's acceptance of some form of higher education. Generally female education was to serve three purposes: to make morally responsible citizens, to ensure a good solid religious training and to prepare students for some type of vocation.³⁸ It is on this latter point where Boggende suggests Upper Canada Academy performed well training girls, particularly native girls to go into the teaching profession.³⁹

When considering DLC I would argue it offered a superior education for females as defined by Gidney and Miller, one in which girls were afforded the advantage of an excellent education combined with strong religious influences and high grade teaching with the purpose of developing an ideal woman. It also offered opportunities to train for vocations similar to those offered by the other ladies' colleges previously discussed. The Reverend De Mille believed his vision for the college made it the pre-eminent

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Bert den Boggende, "The Female Department of Cobourg's Upper Canada Academy, 1836-42, A Monument of Wisdom, Piety Loyalty and Patriotism" in *Ontario History* 88:3 (September 1995), 275.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 280.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 281.

facility of its kind in the Dominion. This vision borrowed liberally from the philosophies of Mary Lyon of Mount Holyoke Seminary in Massachusetts and included a minimum entrance age of 16 to ensure girls were prepared to study at this level, low tuition to make education accessible to the most possible females, and the idea of the students performing the domestic chores at the school to keep the cost of tuition and upkeep down. The form and function of the education offered at DLC will be discussed within the context of moral environment, the teaching staff, curriculum and the graduates themselves.

Moral Environment

An important component of an education at DLC was the emphasis on the moral training of the students, a responsibility placed in the capable hands of Mrs. De Mille. The Reverend De Mille, as did the other leaders of ladies' colleges at the time, stressed the importance of moral discipline as the students would one day be responsible for raising good Christian children. Although the school was non-denominational, girls were encouraged, and indeed expected, to attend religious services of their parents' choosing. There were also many regulations regarding the type of wardrobe expected (neat, plain and inexpensive), appropriate extra curricular activities (calisthen-

ics, walking, reading), number of visits from home, and correspondence (minimal).⁴⁰ These regulations would ensure the girl's focus was kept on developing the mind and not on frivolous things. To further protect the females from demoralizing influences and local gossip, the Reverend De Mille insisted all students board at the school, for he feared "other influences of a social nature which will readily occur to anyone who will give the matter a moment's consideration [and] which do not tend to develop in student's fondness for the studies they are pursuing."⁴¹ By refusing all day students, De Mille accepted the financial loss as part of the plan to ensure the reputation of his school was protected. "Our students have a better opportunity to pursue their studies where all board in the Institution than they could possibly have with day pupils connected with a town or city gossip and associations that involve late hours and a weakening of the students applications."⁴² It was even suggested that girls from the rural farms could improve their manners by attending the school. Daughters of ministers from all denominations were given special rates to attend DLC and we know a number of clergymen did take De Mille up on his special offer.⁴³ At all times De Mille assured parents their daughters were surrounded by people of only the highest moral and religious character.

⁴⁰ De Mille Ladies College, Annual Calendar, 1881-1882, 15.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 15

⁴² De Mille Ladies College, Annual Calendar 1886-1887, 19

⁴³ Mary and Eunie Roach, DDLC graduates from the class of 1881 were daughters of a Bible Christen Minister. De Mille says he has had a large number of minister's daughters.

Faculty

A second component of the superior education available at DLC was the emphasis placed on the hiring of good, quality teachers. De Mille asserted that even though the tuition was low, he was able to secure the finest teachers. Several had been educated at Mount Holyoke Seminary, the first of the Seven Sister schools, and a leader in female education during the nineteenth century.⁴⁴ Many of the teachers seem to have been recruited shortly after graduation. De Mille touted their qualifications in the school's Annual Calendars. Miss Howland, a teacher of the classics and later principal at DLC, was a Holyoke graduate and this, according to De Mille, was in itself proof of her qualifications. Harriet Hinman and Mary Warner were two other Holyoke graduates as was Mary Sawyer who went on to become Dean of The Western College for Women in Ohio for 25 years.⁴⁵ Vincent Hunt, Director of the Musical Department at DLC, was educated at the renowned Leipzig Conservatory of Music and studied under the masters Carl Reinecke, George Papperitz and Oskar Zwintscher. He also taught at the Toronto Conservatory of Music.⁴⁶

Even with this impressive list of accomplishments by the faculty, some still

expressed serious doubts as to the quality of the teaching staff. The *Oshawa Reformer* newspaper said salaries paid by De Mille were too low compared to the public school system: "We had to pay for it in our high school, and that they were efficiently taught by more competent teachers than was possible to be had for the named salary to be given to tutors in this establishment—\$150 and board."⁴⁷ Considering a female teacher in Oshawa was paid a wage of \$280 per year in 1873, the wages paid by De Mille were not too low if board had already been deducted. Despite the reportedly low pay, several teachers were employed for long periods of time by the college. Miss Hurd, for example, was with the school in 1881 as a music teacher and, by 1891, was classified a head teacher. The teachers themselves expressed their satisfaction with the working conditions at DLC in their annual Mount Holyoke class letters. Abbie Howland wrote, 31 January 1880, "I am happy in my work and have nothing to complain of..."⁴⁸ Mary Eaton's class letter of 12 February 1880 calls her years at De Mille "pleasant" and Hattie Hinman's class letter dated 13 November 1882 states, "the work has been plentiful but much pleasure has accompanied it..."⁴⁹ Abbie Howland's class letter of 1882

⁴⁴ Mount Holyoke was established in 1837. See <www.mtholyoke.edu/about/history>

⁴⁵ Abbie Howland was a graduate of Mount Holyoke's class of 1876, taught math at De Mille for nine years (1876-1885), Mary Warner, class of 1879, taught at De Mille for two years (1880-1882).

⁴⁶ Henry Godfrey, *A Souvenir of Musical Toronto*, (Toronto: Musical Toronto, 1897) 23. <<http://archive.org/details/1897souvenirofmu00godfuoft>>

⁴⁷ *Ontario Reformer*, 21 March 1873.

⁴⁸ Abbie Howland Class Letter 1880, Mount Holyoke College Archives and Special Collections.

⁴⁹ Hattie Hinman Class Letter 1882, Mount Holyoke College Archives and Special Collections.

read, "We have a very happy school here we all think... We have plenty of hard work to do though and much responsibility to bear. Nor are we free from the many anxieties and perplexities which naturally attend a teacher's life."⁵⁰

Curriculum

Although the excellent teaching staff and good moral environment were important considerations when choosing to send a daughter to a ladies' college, it was the broad scope of the curriculum which, according to De Mille, was the one feature which, in his opinion, made his school appear unique in the Dominion. Similar in nature to the curricula at the ladies' colleges previously discussed, DLC offered study in academic and collegiate streams combined with a liberal dose of ornamental study if so desired. There was also a preparatory stream for students who were not yet qualified to study at the collegiate level and it included study in orthography, English grammar, composition, penmanship and Canadian history while studies in the academic stream added courses in bookkeeping, elocution, scripture history, analysis and geography. The Collegiate program was three years in length and included many of the courses mentioned in the academic stream but also Latin, French, algebra, physiology and zoology in the first year and Latin, French, English literature, ge-

ometry, astronomy, logic, ancient history, natural philosophy, natural theology, evidence of Christianity and Scripture history in the second year. Senior students added studies in geology, chemistry, moral science and modern history. The textbooks used were the same as in the public school system including *Harkness Latin Grammar and Reader*, Potts' *Euclid* and *Collier and Shaw English Literature*. Degrees conferred were Mistress of Liberal Arts (M.L.A.) and Mistress of English Literature (M.E.L.) for studies confined to the English branch. By 1887, which was the latest year for which graduation information is available, DLC graduated eighteen students of whom seven had M.E.L.s.⁵¹

The ornamental or accomplishment branches of study as defined in the Demill College Calendar 1881-1882 included courses of study along with the solid subjects. However ornamental instruction was not allowed to interfere with other subjects of greater educational importance.⁵² The purpose of ornamental work was "to furnish pleasant employment for many half hours which may otherwise be wasted."⁵³ Tuition was based on study "in all the English branches, classics, French, German, wax works and fancy needlework."⁵⁴ Extras were defined as music, including vocal and instrumental, needlework, drawing and painting. Diplomas were awarded in instrumental music and

⁵⁰ Abbie Howland Class Letter 1882, Mount Holyoke College Archives and Special Collections.

⁵¹ De Mille Ladies College Annual Calendar 1887-1888, 6.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 21

harmony, vocal music, instrumental music, art, and elocution.

The broad scope of the curriculum at DLC was comparable in nature to the curricula offered at the other ladies' colleges discussed and would certainly qualify under Gidney and Miller's definition as superior education for women. However the question of the purpose of the education as defined by the Reverend De Mille and the expectations of the parents who sent their daughters to the school and of the students themselves should be examined. In particular why would parents from Oshawa choose to send their daughters to a boarding school located in their hometown?

From the very beginnings of the college, the Reverend De Mille emphasized the domestic roles the girls would assume upon their graduation and stressed that the education at DLC would properly prepare them for this role. He suggested unhappy households were the fault of women who lacked specific domestic training. He claimed 90% of girls returning home from boarding school were useless.⁵⁵ De Mille's idea was to include domestic training at the college level because he felt that home and college complemented each other; "the home influence, the domestic knowledge with the necessity of being able to do all that is necessary in a well-kept home can be so interwoven in the college training."⁵⁶ As students performed the necessary domes-

tic chores at the college they were gaining meaningful experience in running a household and this combined with courses in domestic economy, digestion, food, health and habits of life ensured students were adequately prepared to assume their roles in the domestic sphere.⁵⁷

Although preparation for roles in the private sphere was the expressed purpose of the education at Demill, there appears to be another, although more subtly expressed, goal. This was to prepare students, if warranted, for various vocational roles after graduation. Demill College advertised special classes similar to those at Burlington Ladies' Academy, for students wishing to take their teaching certificates. Teaching was only one of the vocations open to the ladies. Studies in the arts department "afforded those who are naturally gifted with the talent a rare opportunity of qualifying themselves to work independently in this sphere of art."⁵⁸ Graduates of the music department were assured that upon completion of the three-year course they were ready to assume teaching duties or proceed with more advanced instruction in the European conservatories. Studies in the ornamental branches were not promoted to the extent of the other branches for De Mille felt they must not interfere with the study of more solid subjects, "The solid English branches with the language must hold a prominent place in the course of study. Proficiency in the Fine Arts is very

⁵⁵ Oshawa's Female College, *Oshawa Vindicator*, 12 August 1873.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ De Mille Ladies' College Annual Calendar 1881-1882, 12.

desirable... but more important than these accomplishments are those studies which will serve to lay the foundation for a thorough English education... this means students will be better fitted to meet the requirements of future life."⁵⁹

The Students

Unfortunately little is known about the girls who attended DLC. However, by matching the names appearing in surviving school catalogues and graduation lists with census and family records, some information can be ascertained. At present we have the names and hometowns of over 300 DLC students and approximately 50% can be located in census or archival material.

The College attracted students from all over the province and Canada. Surviving class lists detail a student body representing towns and villages in New York, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan and the Northwest Territories. Although the school did not accept day students there were six girls (not including the Reverend De Mille's 11-year-old daughter) listed in the 1881 calendar as being from Oshawa. Several of these names were matched with the 1881 census records. Three of them were well above the minimum entrance age of 16. Mary Hancock was 19 and in the preparatory stream, Florence Carswell was 21 and Letitia Annis was 22 and in the first year of the collegiate program. This was not unheard of as Houston and Prentice have noted, "it was not

unusual for a young girl to be taught at home and then, in her early teens, to be sent to school for as short a time as a term or for as long as a number of years."⁶⁰ All the girls came from families of at least five children and the Demill students were either first or second oldest. None of their fathers were classified as professionals but occupations included farmers (Hancock and Annis), orator (Carswell) and stage proprietor (Thomas).

Since there are no surviving testimonials from the girls any suggestions as to why local parents would pay the cost of tuition for a boarding school in their home town would be speculative. What is known is DLC students received many accolades in the local press whenever they hosted recitals or art exhibitions. The reputation for producing excellent results may have been enough to convince some parents of the benefits of an education at DLC. Others such as Edward Carswell, a well-known temperance lecturer and artist, may have been convinced by the strong religious influences at the school. Not one of the families could be considered upper class, perhaps suggesting the females were expecting to have at least some work experience prior to marriage. The training opportunities offered in teaching or the fine arts may have been a strong impetus, especially in the cases of the older girls, for an education at Demill.

Most of DLC's students, however, were from outside of Oshawa and some came from well known families. Rebecca

⁵⁹ De Mille Ladies' College Annual Calendar 1886-1887 15.

⁶⁰ Houston and Prentice, *Schooling and Scholars*, 323.

Hermine and Agnes Edith Livingston of Baden, Ontario, attended De Mille in 1883/1884. They were the daughters of Ontario industrialist James Livingston who operated a flaxseed business and served as a member of Provincial Parliament and in the House of Commons.⁶¹ Rebecca and Agnes seemed to enjoy their time at DLC for in a letter to their father Rebecca states, "I think I would rather stay here than go to a strange school. Being that we are acquainted and some students come not far from home."⁶²

Some of the DLC attendees pursued roles in the public sphere after their education. Jennie M. Simpson attended the school for three years in the early 1880s and in 1884 she entered the College of Dentistry of the University of California. Dr. Simpson practiced dentistry in San Francisco for a number of years and held the position of visiting dentist to Children's Hospital. Blanche Lehigh MacLean spent a number of years at DLC starting in 1886 and graduated in elocution in 1892. Blanche continued her education at the Toronto Conservatory of Music where she received a voice degree after which she moved to Nova Scotia, teaching elocution and calisthenics at Halifax Ladies' College. She later became Dean of Women at Acadia University. The moral discipline characteristic of an education at Demill greatly

impacted Blanche for the rest of her life and "she conducted herself according to these strict moral principles."⁶³ Blanche's famous grandchildren, Warren Beatty and Shirley McLaine, were both influenced professionally and personally by their grandmother MacLean. Beatty's great-aunt Katie Lehigh also attended DLC where she studied music and later became a pianoforte instructor.⁶⁴

The End of Demill Ladies' College

The end of DLC was foreshadowed in the *Ontario Reformer*, "it will readily be seen that unless some great and unforeseen calamity befall it, there is a brilliant future in store." For twenty years the town of Oshawa basked in the outstanding reputation of DLC and its excellent curriculum. In April 1896 a fire destroyed the College while fortunately the students were on Easter break. Says De Mille of the event, "On my return [to the College] a scene met my gaze such as I hope to never see again. The institution which had been almost as much to us as our existence lay in ruins."⁶⁵ Fortunately for the students, De Mille was able to salvage the school year by moving operations to his Toronto facility.

Although the Town of Oshawa encouraged De Mille to rebuild the school, financial considerations made it more feasible to secure a building already erect-

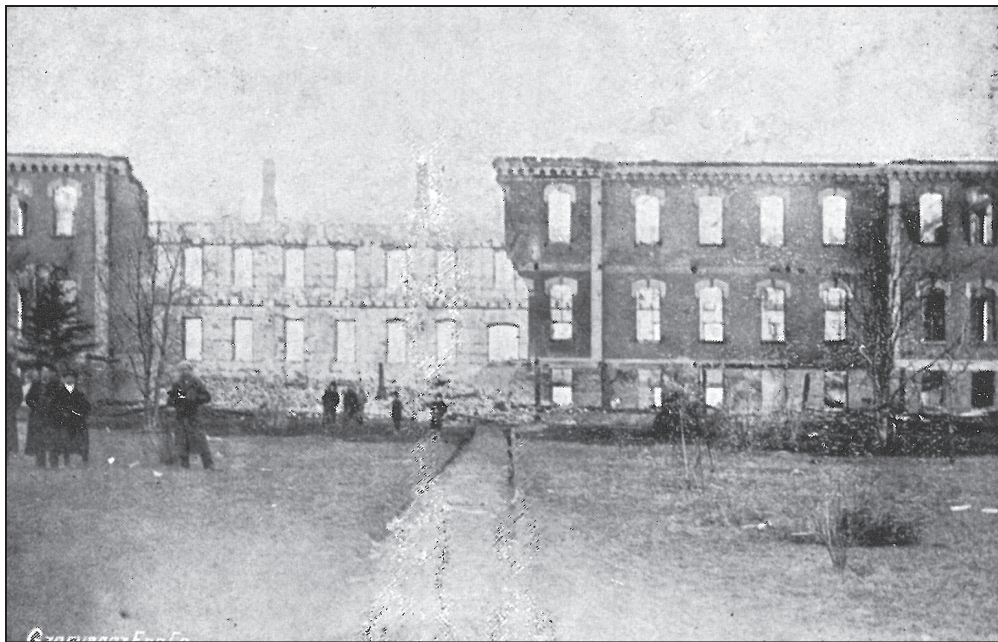
⁶¹ James Livingston's former residence, Castle Kilbride is a National Historic Site.

⁶² Letter written by Rebecca Livingston to her father James Livingston dated 3 February 1884. Courtesy of Castle Kilbride, National Historic Site.

⁶³ Susan Finstad, *A Private Man*, (New York: Harmony Books, 2005), 18.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶⁵ De Mille, *In the Net*, 65.



In April 1896 a fire destroyed Demill Ladies' College.

ed. After visiting several cities and towns, De Mille made the decision to move the college to St. Catharines, Ontario, where it occupied the former Sanatorium building known as Stephenson House.

Conclusion

The development of a distinct curriculum for females arose, as Gidney and Millar suggest, from the idea of two distinct spheres appropriate to men and women. The women's sphere was viewed as being in the home as a homemaker, wife, and most importantly as a mother. It may have extended to the church but Gidney and Millar argue it did not include paid employment opportunities. Boggende and Selles-Rhoney in their respective studies have argued convinc-

ingly for a vocational function of the ladies' colleges to train females for employment if desired. The emphasis placed on teaching by Burlington Ladies' College, Upper Canada Academy, and the other Methodist schools clearly indicates there was some notion of preparing for a vocation on the part of the students, if not the parents. Study in music, art, elocution or modern languages could also be considered employable skills leading to teaching opportunities. To suggest as Gidney and Millar do that most women did not work in the nineteenth century is understood, however it is in no way inclusive. The amount of time devoted to teacher training classes and the suggestion of work in the art field indicates there must have been a demand for this type of training

from the middle class. The further training opportunities available to graduates from these colleges also indicates that at least some of the girls were not marrying immediately upon graduation and would expect to be working.

Defining the form and function of superior education for females in nineteenth-century Ontario is closely related to changing ideologies regarding the role of females in society. At the very least

educators could be seen as participating in a delicate balancing act of maintaining parental and public support for the institutions while at the same time providing opportunity for the female students. Although overtly advertised as academies supporting the traditional private sphere of female domesticity, in reality these schools must be considered as important training venues for females to assume public roles if desired.

Contributors

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