

## 100 Years of Women in the Law

The Visitor's Lecture by The Rt Hon. the Baroness Hale of Richmond DBE



Lady Hale's lecture highlighted the many firsts secured in the 100 years since women gained admittance to the legal profession; rather a high proportion had been achieved by Girtonians! She opened with the observation that Girton's foundation had marked the first opportunity for women to study at the ancient English Universities; tribute was duly paid to those early pioneers who showed that women could successfully study the law (notably Janet Wood, Anne Tuthill and Sarah Mason, who had studied law in the 1870s passing the 'special examination for women'). As well as the fight to study law and take degrees (which

only happened in 1948), there was the struggle for the right to qualify as professional lawyers which went on until 1919. Until then, in deciding that women were not 'persons' judges had relied on what they thought was immemorial custom to keep women out of the legal profession. Perhaps men did not like the idea of competition... However, the First World War changed everything. Women did all sorts of jobs (Girtonian Sybil Campbell, who later became the first woman Metropolitan Stipendiary Magistrate, was an enforcement officer for the Ministry of Food, for example). Middle class women aged 30 or more got the right to vote in Parliamentary elections in 1918. However it was equally the fact that so many young men who might otherwise have joined the legal profession lost their lives during the war that led to the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919. This gave women their first opportunity to enter the legal profession in the United Kingdom and to become magistrates and eventually judges.

Lady Hale went on to note that Girtonian Carrie Morrison was the first woman to be admitted as a solicitor in England, in 1922 and that Girtonian Maud Cross was the first to set up in practice as a solicitor. The first two women to be called to the Bar in the United Kingdom, in 1921 (before the Irish Free State was established), were from Ireland, Averil Deverill and Frances Kyle; Ivy Williams was the first woman to be called to the English Bar, in 1922 (she went on to become the first academic lawyer). Margaret Kidd from Scotland became the first woman advocate in 1923; she was the only woman advocate in Scotland for 25 years and the first woman to take silk in the United Kingdom (in 1948). Some of these early women faced hostility: Helena Normanton, the first woman to join an Inn of Court, for example, was described as a 'warhorse from the old feminist days.'

As the lecture unfolded it became clear that despite the early pioneers' courage, progress was very slow for the first 50 years. It was not until 1962 that Elizabeth Lane became the first woman county court judge. In the 1970s the number of women studying law in Universities and qualifying as solicitors or barristers grew steadily; they have been close to or above parity with men for decades. This was not the case for senior positions, however. Justice is supposedly blind to such matters, but it is hard not to mind when it takes so much time...



Lady Hale said that there were at least four reasons why we should want more women lawyers and judges. First, the rule of law. Law had to serve, gain the confidence of, and reflect every member of society; women made up half of that society. Secondly, the values of justice, fairness and equality. These guiding principles of our law should be visibly embodied in the lawyers who administer the laws as well as in the laws themselves. Thirdly, equality of opportunity. As well as benefitting individuals, efficient use of talent benefitted society. Talents were being

wasted due to the difficulties for women (and men) in combining career and family responsibilities; sensible and practical answers had to be found. Fourthly, the enhancement of the law itself. The law was not a neutral set of principles and rules. As Lady Hale's case-law examples demonstrated, the different experience of living a woman's life might bring a different perception of normality and fairness from that brought by living a man's life; both were entitled to equal respect.

In concluding, Lady Hale stated that, as we celebrated 150 years of Girton's history, we should also celebrate these many firsts of Girton women in law. From the early law students, to Carrie Morrison and Maud Crofts, to Sybil Campbell, to Mary Arden, first woman High Court Judge in the Chancery Division and first woman to chair the Law Commission, to Rosalyn Higgins, first woman Judge on the International Court of Justice in The Hague, and to our fourth Visitor, succeeding Lord Balfour, Lord Baldwin of Bewdley, and Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, the first woman to be given an honorary degree by this University, in 1948. She wondered whether, if she had known when she came up to read law in 1963 how recently it was that women had been allowed to take degrees and how few women there were practising the law, it would have put her off. She hoped not!