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GLS - Geological Society - review by Áine Hyland of Susan Hegarty's article

"Female Students of Geology in Victorian Dublin"

(Review by Áine Hyland, Ph.D., D.Sc.(h.c.), M.R.I.A.)

This is an interesting and timely paper which explores the attendance of women at the geology lecture series of the Geological Survey in Dublin from 1854 (when the lecture series began) to 1867 when the series ended. The paper explains that although the Geological Survey was involved, the lectures were provided through the Museum of Irish Industry in Dublin. It identifies some of the women who took these courses during the 1850s and 1860s, including those who completed geological examinations for London's Science and Art Department as a result of these lectures. While the data available to the authors of the paper was not definitive in relation to the number of females who attended the lectures, the lists of prize-winners for many of the years enabled the author to provide an overview of women who studied geology in Victorian Dublin.

In 1845 Sir Robert Kane set up the Museum of Irish Industry, named originally as the Museum of Economic Geology. Kane, who was strongly committed to popular education, had previously been involved in organising public lectures on scientific topics in the Royal Dublin Society in the 1830s. The lectures were held in the Geological Survey's building in Dublin in a theatre which seated 500 people. When the lecture series was at its height, the theatre was frequently full. The interest of the general public in these lectures was indicative of the thirst for knowledge of the Irish people in mid-19th century Ireland – a period before government grants were available for Intermediate Education and when university education was effectively unavailable for the Catholic population and especially not for women.

The lectures took place both in the afternoon and the evening – the afternoon lectures tended to attract "the upper and middle classes, members of the Royal Dublin Society, young ladies qualifying themselves to be governesses and school-boys". Since females were not permitted to attend university lectures either in the Royal University or in Trinity College, the lectures in the Museum of Irish Industry were particularly welcome. Some of the women who attended the lectures sat the examinations of the (London-based) Science and Art Department and did very well in these examinations. Many of the women took other courses as well as course in geology. According to Sir Robert Kane, the women fared particularly well in the natural sciences examinations as these required "accuracy and observation, clearness of perception, great power of comparison, and delicacy of touch" – attributes in which "the gentlemen were very deficient". Indeed the highest mark ever awarded in geology was in 1861 to a female student - Margaret Swan – who achieved the remarkable score of 956 out of 1,000.

The paper provides details of some of the successful women. A Miss Elizabeth Armstrong of Baggot St, received the first certificate in geology as well as the second prize in natural history. A Miss K.H. Egan received certificates in geology, zoology and natural science. At a

prize-winning ceremony in 1861, the Lord Lieutenant, Lord Carlisle commented that “it seems only right and becoming in a country where an illustrious Lady fills the very highest place in the realm, that all classes of our women should have the opportunity of showing that they can excel in the accomplishments and attainments which are consistent with the grace and modesty of the female character”.

This paper is a valuable and welcome addition to the available research on female education in the nineteenth century. It provides previously undocumented evidence of the success of women in the sciences and eliminates any suggestion that the female brain was incapable of engaging with scientific enquiry or with higher learning generally. It also provides evidence, if such is required, that the exclusion of women from university and higher education and denying them the right to vote in the nineteenth century, was based, not on any evidence of their intellectual inferiority but was the result of gender prejudice which has not yet been fully eradicated in western society. I am delighted to recommend this paper for publication in the forthcoming edition of The Geological Society’s Special Publications.