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Dalrymple, Learmonth White

by Dorothy Page

Biography

Learmonth White Dalrymple was born to William Dalrymple and his wife, Janet (Jessie) Taylor, and was baptised at Coupar Angus, Angus, Scotland, on 21 July 1827. Her name at baptism was Larmonth Whyte Dalrymple. William Dalrymple was a prosperous merchant in ironmongery and agricultural products. Although his daughter would later complain of the inadequacy of her schooling, especially in mathematics, and express her hopeless yearning for 'mental culture', her education was not neglected. She attended Madras College in St Andrews, and later travelled in Europe, where she learned to speak fluent French. However, Learmonth Dalrymple was not entirely free to pursue her inclination for study. Her mother died in 1840 and as the eldest of eight surviving children she took over the considerable task of caring for the family.

In 1853 she set out with her father, two sisters and a brother for New Zealand. The family spent two months at Dunedin while their storm damaged vessel, Rajah, was under repair, and then travelled on to their destination, Wellington. However, they decided to return to Otago and by 1857 they had settled on a farm at Kaihiku, South Otago, where Learmonth Dalrymple kept house for the family and helped establish the first Sunday school in the district.

When the Otago Boys' High School opened in 1863, a leader in the Otago Daily Times, probably by Julius Vogel, urged a 'companion institution' for girls. This set Learmonth Dalrymple on a seven-year-long campaign, waged with discreet persistence, for girls' secondary education in Otago. She first appealed to her neighbour and friend, Major J. L. C. Richardson, speaker of the provincial council, initiating a fruitful collaboration in the cause of female education. Richardson advised her to 'go into town and get up a Ladies' memorial to the Council'. Meanwhile he himself moved a resolution there urging the submission of a scheme for girls' education to the next session. This resolution was unanimously affirmed. The 'Ladies' memorial' was less successful. It pointed out how 'inadequate and inefficient' were the existing facilities for girls' education and proposed setting up a school especially for 'the middle and wealthier classes of the colony'. Although moderately worded, its reception was mixed and the council took no action on it. This first phase of the agitation culminated in a public meeting of about 30 women in November 1865. It opened with due decorum, but a series of interruptions, from press reporters, a breathless woman with news of a buggy accident, and a German band outside the windows, turned it into pure farce and caused its abandonment.

The campaign revived before the end of the decade, largely owing to the quiet perseverance of Learmonth Dalrymple, now living nearer to Dunedin, at Port Chalmers. As well as fostering an informal group of Dunedin women supporters, she wrote some 700 or 800 letters to British educationalists and local politicians. In 1868, at her instigation, Provincial Treasurer Julius Vogel tried unsuccessfully to put £1,000 on the estimates, for a girls' school. She then looked higher, winning over Superintendent James Macandrew, who called for proposals from the education board, and in 1869 set up an education commission chaired by the Reverend D. M. Stuart and including nine provincial council members.

Learmonth Dalrymple promptly formed a ladies' committee, and as its secretary she wrote to the commission specifying what kind of school was desirable. Her ideas were based on advice from Frances Buss, famous principal of North London Collegiate School for Girls. She recommended that girls' education should 'in all essential points...be assimilated to that of boys'. The proposed school should have adequate buildings, be in the charge of 'a lady, un-married, or a widow, of attested talents and acquirements' and 'embrace all the branches included in the term "thorough English Education," ' as well as physical training. Fees should be £10 per annum, the school day should open with prayer, and there should be accommodation for boarders. The commission incorporated these suggestions in their report to the provincial council. A principal, Margaret Gordon Burn, was appointed and Otago Girls' High School opened on 6 February 1871 with 78 pupils, the number rising to 130 by the end of the year. The first public high school for girls in the southern hemisphere was securely established.

Learmonth Dalrymple then transferred her lobbying skills to an allied cause, admission of women to the planned University of Otago. Again she received the support of Richardson, who was chancellor when the university opened in July 1871. With her helpers she organised yet another petition, this time to the university council, for 'admittance of ladies'. Many of the 149 signatories were wives of prominent men and their names lent weight to the appeal. On 8 August 1871 the council voted unanimously to admit women, the first university in Australasia to do so.

Besides maintaining her interest in the girls' high school, to which she donated prizes, and the university, where she founded a women's scholarship, Learmonth Dalrymple worked for the kindergarten movement, publishing a pamphlet on the Froebel method of early childhood education.

In 1881 she moved with her father to Feilding, to be near her brother John Dalrymple. She remained there after her father's death the next year. In this period her interests centred on the new Women's Christian Temperance Union and its campaign for women's franchise; she joined the Wellington branch and was later president of a branch at Feilding. Towards the end of her life her health and memory began to fail and she returned to Dunedin. She died at Ashburn Hall, Dunedin, on 26 August 1906, but was buried at Palmerston North.