© 1997, The Concord Review, Inc. (all rights reserved)
Ralph Waldo Emerson Prize 1998

"ONE AIM AND CONCENTRATED PURPOSE" M. CAREY THOMAS AS DARING VISIONARY AND FLAWED REFORMER

Joelle Gail Novey

"There is so much opposition," an eighteen-year-old M. Carey Thomas wrote in her journal with frustration, "to the only thing I care for… it is so impossible to get the highest culture by one's self, and I have to see thousands of boys enjoying and often throwing away the chances I would give anything for."[1] It was not the first nor the last occasion on which Thomas would feel this discrepancy acutely and painfully.

From the mid-nineteenth century, when Martha Carey Thomas was born, until her death in 1935, American reality did not meet her vision of the ideal America. A woman unique in her era in determination and commitment to education, she spent her life in pursuit of this vision. The most salient conflict between Thomas' vision and the America of her era involved the role of women. In this area she was progressive, in the sense that her views presage later changes in American society. Thomas' famous work

---

Joelle Gail Novey is at Harvard. She was a Senior at the Bryn Mawr School in Baltimore, Maryland, when she wrote this paper for Ms. Jill Komura's United States History course during the 1995/1996 academic year.

as president of Bryn Mawr College and as a founder both of the Bryn Mawr School and of the Johns Hopkins Medical School was a significant force in moving America closer to her vision. Earlier, her unprecedented doctoral degree at the University at Zurich had been in itself a contribution to the American women's movement. Though America did not become the place she envisioned during her lifetime, the institutional legacies and models Thomas helped create were partially responsible for the significant changes in America that were to take place decades later. Today, Thomas' vision has largely become a reality for American women.

While Thomas' vision that women could be equal players in the educational arena was ahead of her time, she possessed other unprogressive traits and attitudes, such as racism and anti-Semitism, that were by no means rare in her time. In some way though, Thomas' work to include a group that had been excluded from higher education provided the foundation for the institutions she created to move beyond her own, personal prejudices. In later years, these schools came to embrace the religious and racial inclusion that is now a desired, if still evolving, characteristic of our present America. Flawed and visionary, vibrant and stubborn, M. Carey Thomas lived a life "at the pitch of Italian opera," and, through personal example and the building of institutions, brought American reality significantly closer to her vision.[2]

Born in January 1857 into a middle-class Baltimore family of Orthodox Quakers, "Minnie" Thomas was seen by her parents as a "fitting daughter who would marry and have children of her own." At age seven, a horrible burn caused this bright and pious child to wonder "why Heavenly Father was not with her then."[3] It was an experience after which "at an existential level Minnie now had grounds for religious doubt."[4] As the burn healed and Minnie embarked on an adventurous childhood characterized by numerous stunts such as walking on roofs, by misbehaving at school, and by attending lectures with her parents, Mary Whitall and James Carey Thomas patiently sought to guide but not control their energetic daughter.[5]

From early youth, Thomas had a clear vision of her own future. Though in her youthful imaginings she vacillated between becoming a geologist, doctor or physicist, her childhood dreams maintained at their center the pursuit of an education and her independence. She identified strongly with Jo March, the "plucky, impulsive and literary" character in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women.*[6] At fourteen she first set her sights on going to college.[7] At fifteen her journal records her imagined future with her best friend and distant cousin Bessie King: one day they "would devote ourselves to study, live together, have a library with all the splendid books…great big easy chairs where we could sit lost in books for days together…" as well as a laboratory for conducting scientific experiments. Thomas wrote as a teenager that her ideal woman has read classical authors, the ideas of the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment, and studied various branches of math and is "not any less like God really intended a woman to be."[8] Horowitz points out that Thomas' vision was surprisingly secular for her Quaker background.[9] She dreamed that these endeavors would become a beacon of light for others: "all who passed," she wrote in her journal, "should say, 'Their example arouses me, their ideas inspire me and behold they are women!'"[10]

While those who peered through the window would "behold" that she was a woman, Thomas did not see this as an impediment to her goals. Others, however, saw her gender as a prohibitive condition. Historians argue that two models of womanhood existed in the America of Thomas' childhood, True Womanhood and Real Womanhood. The Cult of True Womanhood opposed Thomas' vision because it held that women were not intended physically or mentally to be educated in the same way as boys and that such education was detrimental to their health. The true genius of the woman, according to this view, lay in domestic activities. As an adolescent, Thomas records awareness of this view. When judging women, she writes, it was "the trifling butterfly, the ignorant doll baby which they admire."[11]

The second ideal, defined by Frances B. Cogan as Real Womanhood, differed in its enthusiastic support for women's

primary and even secondary education. Chase identifies Thomas' mother as exemplifying the Real Woman. Yet as Cogan points out, the education of the Real Woman was intended to prepare her for marriage and motherhood, not a profession. These Real Womanhood writers agreed, Cogan writes, "that women's main and primary profession was most often that of wife and mother."[12] So the ideal of Real Womanhood did not fully support Thomas' vision either, though it meant that Thomas did not glaringly deviate from her mother and society's path until she sought to pursue the highest levels of academic work.

Almost from the time of her infancy, Minnie Thomas registered in her journal that the vision nineteenth-century society had for girls differed from her own. To begin with, Horowitz points out that in Thomas' identification with Alcott's character Jo, "she declared her independence from conventional notions of womanhood."[13] After an episode in which she and Bessie killed and boiled a mouse to obtain a skeleton for their experiments, Bessie's father criticized his daughter about her loss of feminine traits. "I'm afraid I haven't got any to lose," Minnie confides to her diary, "for I greatly prefer cutting up mice to sewing worsted."[14] Minnie and Bessie frequently encountered gender-related resistance to their spirited games: "People seem to think that girls don't want any fun," she told her journal, "and even if [girls] do want to row and climb [adults] are shocked and say it isn't LADYLIKE but [Bessie] and I are going to resist to the last!"[15]

To some extent Thomas' parents' leniency with their daughter and their encouragement of her initial education helped to support her own vision. Certainly her mother and Aunt Hannah Whitall Smith's liberal activities and attitudes were a boon to Minnie's own goals and ideas. Barbara Chase points out that Minnie's mother "exemplified in her involvement with temperance, education and other reform movements, as well as her community involvement, an outward focus that challenged the purest ideals of true womanhood, [the Victorian ideal of femininity]."[16] Thomas' Aunt Hannah was also involved in reform as an evangelist and a writer.

At times, however, Minnie's home also became a source of conflict between her own vision and that of society. When Minnie doubted some of the writings of St. Paul, she reported that her "father said no, that he was right that the man was the head of the woman as Christ the head of the church—that God made it so."[17] Minnie responded in her diary with indignation: "Oh I can't stand it. It's too unjust, too horrible that things should be so, of course I don't believe it."[18] In another instance, a guest prompted a dinner table conversation during which some of the men present "talked as if the whole end and aim of a woman's life was to get *married* and when she attained the *greatest state of earthly bliss* it was her duty to amuse her husband and to learn nothing."[19] Even Thomas' mother, when Minnie and Bessie asked if they could have a science lab, responded, "Oh, you can't, you're *girls.*"[20]

Minnie chafed under the perceived injustice of these inconsistencies between her vision, and reality. She saw her own future life as an opportunity to prove prevailing attitudes wrong. "It seems to me," she wrote in her diary at age fifteen, "I'd die if I could do anything to show that a woman is equal to a man, it is such a burning shame that [women] should have it always poked in their faces."[21] Minnie's frustration centered especially around educational opportunities for women: "Oh I think it's cruel when a girl wants to go to college and learn and she can't and is laughed at and absolutely kept from it," she wrote in response to a lecture she had heard on women's rights, "while a boy is made to go whether he wants to or not."[22] She presented the issue more personally in a letter to her cousin Frank at Princeton: "I hope thee sympathizes with thy poor cousin," she wrote, "who has to struggle against the bigotted [prejudice] of her paternal and maternal ancestors…"[23]

By late adolescence, Thomas' responses to these realities were consistent: "How unjust—how narrow minded—how utterly uncomprehensible to deny that women ought to be educated and worse than all to deny that they have equal powers of mind."[24] She had also clearly defined her life's work: "If I ever live and grow up my one aim and concentrated purpose shall be and is to show that

a woman can learn can reason can compete with men in the grand fields of literature and science and conjecture that opens before the 19 century… [sic]"[25]

Yet as she herself pointed out in her journal, Thomas' quarrels with society were twofold: "I don't see why the world is made so unjust and I don't see why an unjustness should be turned against girls in general and me in particular."[26] Thomas, before she could address "unjustness" against "girls in general," would have to overcome that affecting herself "in particular." As Horowitz writes, "she operated in a world without models of who she could be and become…She had to create herself, imagine herself." For this reason, it is arguable that Thomas' own life in and of itself was a significant contribution to bringing women closer to her vision. Though Thomas' efforts to combat "unjustness" against "girls in general" are better known, the challenge of creating herself was one to which she had to respond earlier in life, and so can be seen as the more daunting one. "It is easy to forget," Horowitz writes, "what an immense task that was."[27] In this first endeavor, Thomas was to embark on an education that began conventionally and ended in completely unprecedented, ground-breaking territory.

Atter several years at Howland Institute, a Quaker girls' boarding school in upstate New York which Thomas pronounced "a first-rate place to study and an elegant place for fun," she set her sights on Cornell. One of Thomas' Howland teachers, Jane Slocum, had called her aside and told her, "you have good habits of study, and now I think I have found out what you can do…what we want in the cause of women…[is] scholars."[28] Abandoning her more socially acceptable plan to attend Vassar, an all-women's college, Thomas took her teacher's suggestion to apply for the first Cornell class to include women boarders. She felt a coed college would be of higher caliber, calling Cornell "the highest place open to ladies" in a letter to her Aunt Hannah.[29] Though it took some convincing, Thomas' parents were finally sold on the idea.[30]

Carey Thomas completed the Classical Course at Cornell in two years, focusing on language and literature.[31] Due in part to her parents' insistence that she have nothing to do with the male

students, however, it proved to be a disappointing experience for her. "Cornell had given [Carey] an opportunity for intellectual growth," Horowitz writes, "but what she desired was … the feeling of true knowing that could conquer all doubt."[32] Carey would have to go elsewhere to realize her vision: "Her mind was a void to be filled," writes Horowitz, "and Cornell had not filled it."[33] Thomas' attempts to pursue graduate work at the Johns Hopkins University were frustrated by the administrators' insistence that she work with a professor privately and not attend any classes or seminars. Experiencing a period of self-doubt and frustration, Thomas submitted her resignation to Hopkins in October 1878: "under the present regulations," she wrote, "the assistance referred to cannot be obtained."[34]

Twice left unsatisfied, Thomas now turned her eyes toward Europe, where some universities were more willing to accommodate women. As Horowitz points out, Thomas' determination to take this "unusual and uncertain step" derived partly from a resentful competition with Francis Gummere, a young man with a college degree from Haverford and a graduate degree from Harvard with whom she had been in love.[35] Yet unquestionably it was also an attempt to bring her future closer to her early vision. On August 22, 1879, accompanied by her friend Mamie Gwinn, Thomas departed Baltimore for Germany. At the University of Leipzig in Germany, where women were permitted to audit courses, she pursued comparative literature and what is today called historical linguistics.[36] Carey was thrilled by Germany's "literary atmosphere…One has the sense," she wrote, "of history being unraveled and antiquities dug up and a continual stir of conflicting philological theories."[37] As Carey concluded her studies, she traveled to the University of Zurich, an institution unique in Europe because it offered degrees to women. In 1882, Carey's doctoral thesis on the medieval English romance poem *Sir Gawayne and the Green Knight* and her essay on the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne (an unacknowledged collaboration with Mamie) pleased the faculty so much that, after a three-hour oral examination, they told her she had graduated *summa cum laude*. It was an

honor usually granted only once in two decades to men and never before in any field to a woman.

The symbolic importance of this academic achievement was not lost on Thomas: "The fact that no woman had ever received a 'summa' before made it as nice a thing for women in general as it was for me in particular," she wrote home.[38] In a real sense, M. Carey Thomas had broken new ground for America in her own construction of herself. "Carey Thomas at twenty-one had no corporeal models," Horowitz points out, "no living women to show her how to become what she wanted to be … [she] was utterly alone."[39] After Thomas became a doctor of philology no young American woman seeking advanced education would be quite so alone, a notable step forward in bringing reality into accordance with Thomas' vision. "She articulated again and again throughout her life," Chase observes "that by example alone, her academic success was an effective campaign in the 'cause.'"[40]

As Thomas grew, her family remained both a source of strength and a spur to revolt. Her growing interest in education fit in, at least at the beginning, with the educational ideals of Real Womanhood. Thomas' primary and secondary education were unexceptional for women of her class in the period, her undergraduate work unusual but acceptable. Even as it became clear that Thomas had hopelessly deviated from the feminine course, getting a degree in Zürich and committing herself to the world of work, her parents did not denounce or restrain her. "As Carey Thomas faced an unknown future," Horowitz writes, "she had an extraordinary mother who moved beyond her own life history to sympathize with her daughter's ambitions and fight for their realization."[41]

Thomas' family also came to represent for her some of what she was certain she did not want to become. Thomas' religious doubt, originating in her childhood burn and nurtured in a secular Enlightenment environment in Europe, ultimately led to a complete rejection of her parents' Orthodox Quakerism. As Thomas began to identify with elite young Baltimore women and the life of art she and Mamie had enjoyed in Europe, she sought

to distance herself from the middle-class casual style of her parents' household. Horowitz points to a line in one of Thomas' letters to her mother as an example of a conscious effort to separate herself from her familiy: she was one of *"nous autres,"* Thomas wrote "...the Gautier, Rossetti school."[42]

Having satisfactorily righted the "unjustness" the world had presented against herself in particular, Thomas moved on to address its "unjustness" against girls in general. Even before she left Europe, she had pinned her hopes on Bryn Mawr, the Quaker women's college just being founded whose board included her father, uncle, and several cousins.[43] Thomas' fantasies about what form such a college should take directly reflected her personal quarrel with American reality: "[Bryn Mawr should become] a great university of women scholars," she wrote back home, "where publications and investigations...done by women should prove original thinking power."[44] She soon abandoned her interest in the post of professor of literature and set her sights on the presidency of the college despite her inexperience. "Oh dear, if I had the organization of the college," she wrote home, "I am sure I could make it the greatest success."[45] The board, however, was not so sure. As Horowitz points out, Thomas was twenty-five and had never been employed.[46] Her arguments that "it is best for the president of a woman's college to be a woman," may point to gender as another source of the board's hesitance.[47] She was finally appointed the Dean of the Faculty to serve under President James E. Rhoads, the importance of which in women's circles was indicated by her Aunt Hannah's response: "I...congratulate, not thee, but the coming women of our nation on the stride that has been made in their advancement by this step."[48]

She served as dean of the college from its founding in 1885 until 1894. Upon Rhoads' retirement in 1894, the board members favored her as president but "were terrified at the thought," one of Thomas' uncles wrote, "of putting a *woman* in sole power."[49] Encouraged by Mary Garrett's offer to contribute more than ten percent of the college's operating budget annually as long as Thomas was president, and by the support of Rhoads and key

board members, and having exhausted all other options, the board elected Thomas president, a job she would hold until 1922.[50] Though Thomas had connections on the board, the vision trustees had for Bryn Mawr college differed radically from her own. While they envisioned a small sectarian women's college, she hoped to make Bryn Mawr a large bastion of secular scholarship, a veritable "Leipzig in America."[51]

Thomas trusted only herself with her grand schemes for Bryn Mawr's future. Horowitz describes her as constantly overworked and overwhelmed, largely because of her inability to delegate responsibility. "I am rather shriveled up," Thomas wrote to her friend Mary Garrett after a hectic day on the job, "… and dying for a let up and wondering whether days of students and professors and workmen are worth the candle if one's personality goes to pieces."[52] Thomas had not set herself an easy task. "As a college executive," Horowitz points out, "… she balanced a conservative Quaker board, a secular and increasingly professional faculty, [eventually] assertive and intrusive alumnae, and all the variety of human nature that students present."[53] Thomas felt her construction of Bryn Mawr was a "house of cards that thirteen irresponsible men [on the board] can in a moment destroy."[54] Thomas soon learned the difficulties of attracting and keeping serious scholars, who could be as demanding as they were talented. "Your true professor," Thomas once complained, "sensitive to books and opinions, is a most inflammable article" and she remarked that she was "tired of being the nursing mother of the famous scholars of this country."[55] Horowitz describes Thomas' days as being characterized by "fragmentation, pressure, and frustration."[56] Yet if Thomas "drove herself beyond her strength," it was with good reason: "She worked so hard, controlled all, did not delegate, and insisted on perfection," Horowitz writes, "because only she had a clear vision of Bryn Mawr."[57]

Through a passionate personal life and several family losses, Thomas nevertheless built Bryn Mawr College in the image of her vision. In the lives of students, her chapel talks, often delivered off the cuff, sought to "get them to appreciate standards

and manners, to open them to new political, literary, and artistic currents, to frame for them a sense of the importance of higher education for women, and to provide a model of ideal womanhood to which they could aspire."[58] Thomas' fund-raising made possible the construction of Dalton Hall, a new science building, and her cooperation in creating the charter of the Bryn Mawr Students' Association for Self-Government resulted in the first such body in an American college. Bryn Mawr's Graduate Department of Social Economy was the first graduate school in the field to offer a Ph.D. More broadly, Thomas had created the "great university" she envisioned where the board had only desired a small sectarian women's college.

"I do so want girls to have the opportunity for culture," Thomas had written while still studying in Europe, "without having to exile themselves for years to obtain it" as she had had to do.[59] Thomas sought to bring America closer to this vision primarily through her work at Bryn Mawr College. In two additional ways, Thomas worked to achieve this same vision with her friends back in Baltimore. Two institutions, the Bryn Mawr School and the Johns Hopkins Medical School, were the result.

Concerned that her younger sisters were having a hard time getting an education in Baltimore, Thomas joined with four friends to found a college-preparatory girls' school. The free-thinking, upper-class quintet Thomas formed with Mary Garrett, Mamie Gwinn, Bessie King, and Julia Rogers had constituted an informal club called the Friday Evening during the years before Thomas' European sojourn. Now the group made up the new Bryn Mawr School's Board of Managers. With Thomas' tenacity and educational connections, Garrett's wealth (as heiress to one half of the B&O Railroad fortune), and the cooperation of the others, the board hoped to fill the "void" Horowitz describes in "secondary schooling for girls" in that era.[60] The school opened in September 1885 and five years later moved into the Cathedral Street building designed and funded by Garrett that would serve as its nineteenth, and early-twentieth century home.

Thomas' letter requesting space for Bryn Mawr School in the Liberal Arts Building of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago sheds light on how she viewed the school and its mission.[61] Thomas pointed to three defining characteristics that made Bryn Mawr unique. First, the "inflexible college standard for all pupils" distinguished Bryn Mawr from other "female" schools. "Latin for example," she writes "is begun as soon as the child enters the school at ten or eleven years of age. German or Greek are studied in the last three years of the course." Further, all students must pass the "highest entrance examinations of any college," (those of Bryn Mawr College) in order to graduate. Second, Thomas emphasized that "we are trying to combine with this college preparatory work the usual branches of a liberal education —drawing for example, history and literature, a combination of Sargent and Swedish gymnastics, including swimming and fencing." Thomas called this arrangement an "experiment [that] seems to us of the greatest interest for the future education of girls" and another area in which "the school seems to us to differ from other public or private schools." Finally, Thomas cites the fact that the Bryn Mawr School has been in the black for the past two years and can award some college scholarships as evidence that "such a school can be self-supporting."[62] (Thomas eventually succeeded in securing a spot for the school in the fair.)

Thomas was by no means the most central nor the most influential player in Bryn Mawr School's development. Though she tried to maintain authority over minute details of the school's operation her necessary distance from the school while in Pennsylvania meant that she could not micro-manage as much as she would have liked. Garrett, a lady of leisure living in Baltimore, could throw her money and energy into the Bryn Mawr School while for Thomas, a busy college president living in Pennsylvania, Bryn Mawr "was often the one thing too much in [her] overcrowded day."[63] The school certainly never took Thomas' center stage and she once even compared Bryn Mawr to a "deformed child" that demanded her precious time in its infancy.[64] Nor did Thomas aid the efforts of Edith Hamilton, Bryn Mawr's defining headmistress. Continuing to insist on personally approving every

school expense, Thomas impeded Hamilton's work and the headmistress "built a remarkable school" only by sheer "persistence and force of will."[65] Hamilton finally resigned when these tensions exploded in 1922, ending her twenty-six years as headmistress.

Peripheral as her role seems, however, Thomas was unquestionably partly responsible for the part Bryn Mawr School would play in bringing America closer to her vision. Horowitz points out that Thomas brought to Bryn Mawr's founding board a "position, clear ideas, a direct and articulate manner, and growing insight into the way that institutions worked" that it otherwise would have lacked.[66] In the school's early years, Thomas helped to interview prospective teachers, visited classes and helped to arrange the schedule.[67] Though unquestionably Hamilton's serene, democratic manner had a more lasting effect on the school's institutional culture, that personality never would have had the guts and stubbornness to create such a school. Edith Hamilton caused Bryn Mawr School to become, but M. Carey Thomas caused Bryn Mawr School to exist.

Thomas engaged in a third, though also sideline, activity to try to bring America closer to her vision. Working with Garrett, Gwinn, and King in 1888, she approached Daniel Coit Gilman, president of the Johns Hopkins University, with a tempting offer. The four friends would raise and donate $100,000, enough money to endow a medical school, on the condition that the school accept and educate women students equally with men. The young women had important allies: Mamie's father was Charles J.M. Gwinn, the executor of Johns Hopkins' will; Francis T. King, Bessie's father, was the chairman of the Hopkins hospital board of trustees and director of the hospital; James Thomas, Carey's father, was a University Trustee. The four women launched a nationwide campaign in fifteen cities which drew a number of female celebrities of the era, including the writer Sara Orne Jewett and the First Lady Mrs. Benjamin Harrison.[68] Once the money was raised, the board accepted the offer but stated that $500,000 would be needed before the school could open. At this point Garrett almost single-handedly made up the difference, with a contribution comparable

to almost $5 million in today's terms. In all of this campaigning and maneuvering, Horowitz writes that Thomas played the role of "chief negotiator."[69] The Johns Hopkins Medical School thus became one of the first in the country to accept women.

The main way in which American reality did not jibe with Thomas' vision was that women were not allowed into all tiers of higher education and that their educational pursuits were not seen as leading to scholarly or occupational goals. In both of these areas, the institutions Thomas helped build played a significant role in bringing America closer to her vision.

The presidency of Bryn Mawr, Thomas wrote to a friend in 1919, was "a very great club to wield in the good fight…to help women get free materially and intellectually."[70] A commissioned portrait by John Singer Sargent brought Thomas national recognition and numerous speaking engagements.[71] Publishing her talks as articles, lending her name to women's causes including suffrage, and, in a famous moment, criticizing Charles William Eliot, the president of Harvard, all brought Thomas and her views celebrity status. As the higher education of women became an increasingly less radical position, Thomas "spoke as the legitimate voice of enlightened public opinion."[72] In this way the Bryn Mawr presidency launched Thomas onto a public platform from which she sought to "preach" her vision of America.

Census statistics demonstrate strikingly, if somewhat coldly, the victories Thomas helped win by wielding the "great club" of Bryn Mawr with a passion during her 37-year career. In 1884, the year before Bryn Mawr College opened for business, only 18% of the Americans who received bachelor's degrees were women.[73] By the time Thomas retired from Bryn Mawr in 1922, that figure had almost doubled to 33% of degrees conferred, despite an almost four-fold increase in the number of men receiving degrees. In other words, between 1884 and 1922, the number of women graduating from college increased eight-fold from less than 2,500 to more than 20,000, double the rate of increase in degrees conferred on men. As one of the "seven sisters," the first major

American colleges for women, Bryn Mawr College definitely deserves some of the credit for this striking increase.

The ability the College had to add its graduates to these statistics was, in turn, primarily the work of Thomas. "She was able," Horowitz writes, "to turn a small, excellent college and graduate school, largely of her own devising, into a larger, grander version of itself."[74] As the president of Mt. Holyoke College, Mary Emma Woolley said at Bryn Mawr's twenty-fifth anniversary: "The progress of Bryn Mawr College, its place in the educational world, is, to an unusual degree, the work of the woman whose name has been identified with it from the beginning."[75]

Bryn Mawr School, too, helped achieve Thomas' vision by allowing elite Baltimore girls to be among those women able to attend institutions of higher education such as Bryn Mawr College. Horowitz writes unequivocally that Bryn Mawr School "succeeded in its central mission," in that its graduates were accepted into Bryn Mawr College and that, by the turn of the century, a significant group had chosen to attend.[76]

In criticizing Eliot, the president of Harvard, for his remarks in 1899 that women could not handle the curriculum of men's colleges, Thomas made a telling statement: "[As] progressive as one may be in education or other things, there may be in our minds some dark spot of medievalism and clearly in President Eliot's otherwise luminous intelligence women's education is this dark spot."[77] Women's education proved no dark spot for Thomas; her "luminous intelligence" allowed her to create herself as a Ph.D. and to build institutions that would allow other women to obtain equal education. But Thomas was by no means free of "dark spots" in the sense that her racism and anti-Semitism, in contrast to her progressive stance on women's education, did not presage later changes in American society. Ironically, these attitudes manifested themselves in her decisions as a leader in the same institutions that her progressivism had made possible. Of the institutions Thomas helped to found, Bryn Mawr College and Bryn Mawr School were the two that remained under her leadership and so provided opportunities for her to act on her prejudices.

Thomas' racism often manifested itself in her work at Bryn Mawr College. After having dinner with Booker T. Washington, she complained that though he was a good story teller, "…he is like a Negro in the way his mind works and he relapses into Negro pronunciations." When a magazine article brought up Bryn Mawr's policy on African-Americans hypothetically,Thomas's response was revealing. The question had never come up, she wrote: "The difficulty of our entrance examinations and the fact that we do not admit or certificate may perhaps account for this." More remarkable was Thomas' response when Jessie Fauset, an honor student at a Philadelphia public school was in line to win one of four Bryn Mawr scholarships offered to outstanding graduates of her school. Thomas, working quietly, arranged for Fauset to attend Cornell instead, personally paying 10% of her tuition and arranging to help with the rest.[78] Fauset's later career as an intellectual figure in her own right was irrelevant to Thomas. As Horowitz writes "Carey Thomas' racism was such that no specific could ever challenge it."[79]

Thomas' anti-Semitism became an issue more often because it was more divergent from the general attitudes of society at the time than was racism. At Bryn Mawr College, Thomas focused on the 'Jewishness' of the Jews she encountered over and above any interest in them as individuals. As Horowitz writes, "Whatever the context, she fastened on their Jewishness as their salient characteristic; and normally, this led her to an angry derogation."[80] Thomas maneuvered unapologetically to keep Jews off the faculty of Bryn Mawr preferring instead "our own good Anglo-Saxon stock."[81] Thomas had Jewish students at Bryn Mawr housed separately from their Christian classmates.

The Bryn Mawr School especially, Horowitz points out, "reveals her social attitudes in action at the end of the nineteenth century." Thomas fought, unsuccessfully, to prevent the Jewish applicant Sadie Szold (sister of Henrietta Szold founder of Hadassah) from attending Bryn Mawr. When the board continued to feel admission should be open to Jews, Thomas wrote Garrett a letter that strained the relationship for months: "I have heard from

Mamie what you have done about Jews and I am very much worried …I should on no account take them, and I register my *strongest* protest."[82] In the margin Thomas wrote "…I wish us to escape from them at all hazards. It is so important."[83] What Thomas did and what she wanted others to see, however, differed dramatically. When an 1890 article in *The Jewish Exponent* reported that Bryn Mawr admitted only a fixed number of Jews, Thomas wrote a letter denying the charge: "All children whose studies have been such as to enable them to enter the classes, and who will apparently be suitable companions to the children already in the school are admitted without discrimination on grounds of race or religion."[84] A letter from the school's secretary Colvin to Garrett suggests the instructions Thomas had actually given her: "… not to admit more than a certain number of Israelites, I simply said that was *the rule.*"[85]

Some of the most striking evidence of Thomas' attitudes rest in the Bryn Mawr School Papers in the carbon copies of early credit reports. Lucy West explains that the Bryn Mawr board commissioned credit investigations when applicants came from families that the board did not know.[86] Many times these reports list "Hebrew" or "Israelite" as the first entry. In every case Thomas' penciled handwriting indicates that the candidate is "refused" or "not approved," regardless of the contents of the rest of report. The following report from 1896 not only identifies the applicant's family as Jewish but the report itself is blurred by stereotype: "The above is a Hebrew past middle-aged, married and has a family… He stands well in the neighborhood personally, but he is very hard to get any money out of and has always borne the reputation of slow pay, even though he has been financially fixed to do better if he wanted to do so…" And in the upper right hand corner Thomas' penciled handwriting can be seen clearly: "B.M.S. refused."[87] Notations on two other credit reports include "socially undes." and "We cannot ascertain what denomination he belongs to." In addition the application to the school had a blank for "Church" along with name, previous education, address etc.

The origins of Thomas' un-progressive attitudes are multiple and complex. Part of the answer lies in the historical era: as

Horowitz points out in a footnote, in the nineteenth century "both [racism and discrimination against blacks] were so well accepted that they were not issues."[88] In her anti-Semitism, too, to some extent, Thomas lived in an era of rising American anti-Semitic and anti-immigrant sentiment in elite Protestant circles.[89]

Underlying Thomas' racial views was her endorsement of the growing national eugenics movement which "promised progressive improvement through breeding of the fit."[90] In her opening address to students in 1916, she advocated that the gates of immigration be closed to those with "less desirable" genes. Though "our first immigration was made up of the dominant races of the world," she pronounced that "we are jeopardizing the intellectual heritage of the American people by this headlong intermixture of races."[91] Widespread travel only corroborated for Thomas the racial views that she had already adopted. In this way, Thomas simply joined in a national movement in which many of America's elite and educated people participated. (It must be remembered that in an era before the Holocaust, the eugenics theory did not carry the weight of meaning and implication that it does today.) Yet as Horowitz points out, especially in the conflict over Szold, "the depth of conflict that Carey Thomas' action caused belies any simple explanation that in her anti-Semitic acts Thomas merely conformed to the notions of her era and social circle."[92]

The progressive side of Thomas, the one that drove her to fight all her life for the inclusion of an excluded group in higher education, would seem to be completely at odds with her racism and anti-Semitism. Yet in critical ways Thomas' courageous construction of herself as a feminist provided the basis of her attitudes towards African-Americans and Jews. As Horowitz explains, "With Bryn Mawr [College] she could make a path for those such as she had been—young women of breeding who sought advanced education."[93] Because Thomas did not identify with African-American or Jewish girls, denying them a higher education did not seem to her contradictory to her broader goals. More importantly, Thomas had spent her early life a "weird duck," an outsider, a

radical, rejected by the standards of the society from which she came. Racism and anti-Semitism allowed her to cast herself in the "in" group excluding others, a far more comfortable position. "Consciously or unconsciously she absorbed early the view that the highest kind of intellectual activity excluded *someone*. Thus this idea was present in her formative experience and was not just an unfortunate later accretion."[94]

Further, in order to challenge her society's attitudes towards women, Thomas had to summarily reject her mother's Quaker faith and culture. In the realm of women's education, such a rejection made it possible to move as far beyond conventional expectations as she did. Yet it also left her consciously distancing herself from all that Quakers and her mother respected and valued, including religious tolerance. Horowitz points out that the items in a list Thomas compiled late in life, "Jews… Reasons for dislike of them:" contain many elements of Thomas' own personality. Hating Jews, Horowitz suggests, was a way for Thomas to objectify elements of herself by projecting them outward, including her special demands, favoritism and independent set of values.[95]

Today, more than sixty years after Thomas' death, her dream has largely become a reality in America and the institutions she helped create continue to play a significant role. These days, a girl is not "laughed at" for wanting to go to college, as Thomas complained was the case in the second half of the nineteenth century. On the contrary, most middle-class parents assume that their children will attend college, regardless of gender or academic inclination. In 1990 for example, women made up 53.2% of those who received bachelor's degrees a far cry from the almost 18% they constituted in 1877 when Thomas graduated from Cornell.[96] In 1882, when Thomas got her doctorate, women Ph.D.s were virtually unheard of and their numbers undocumented.[97] Today, becoming a scholar is a choice for women that does not raise any eyebrows, and in 1990 a full 36.3 percent of doctorates were awarded to about 14,000 American women. Finally, women in 1990 constituted almost 34% of Americans receiving medical

degrees.[98] Certainly these percentages in many cases remain below the approximately 50% women constitute in the young American population. Society has welcomed women into the world of work without fully resolving who will take care of the domestic and parenting roles those women must necessarily compromise. Yet the change in attitude that has taken place in sixty years would probably seem nothing less than a miracle to Thomas, even if statistics have not yet caught up with that attitude. Where Thomas had to be what Horowitz calls a "weird duck," disregarding convention and stubbornly pursuing advanced education on another continent, contemporary young women need not deviate far from society's expectations to pursue advanced degrees at a ready supply of institutions close to home.[99]

The institutions Thomas helped build continue to give women educational opportunities, though they are no longer the sole dispensers of such opportunities. Bryn Mawr College remains a thriving single-sex institution. During the 1994-1995 academic year, the college boasted 1,100 undergraduates and 550 graduate students and remained ranked as "Most Competitive" in Barron's Guide.[100] Bryn Mawr ranks first in the nation in the percentage of its graduates to earn Ph.D.s in the humanities and third in all fields, proving the "original thinking power" of women that Thomas emphasized so highly during her lifetime.[101] Bryn Mawr School, too, continues to carry on the progressive part of Thomas' vision. Though passing the Bryn Mawr College exam is no longer required for graduation, the single-sex school continues to emphasize academic values and to set college preparedness as its goal. The Johns Hopkins Medical School continues to accept women equally although such a policy is now unremarkable.

Today the institutions in which Thomas sought to put her prejudice to work have outgrown those aspects of her personality. Bryn Mawr College accepted its first African-American student in 1931. Bryn Mawr School would do the same 30 years later. In the 1994-95 academic year, more than a quarter of Bryn Mawr College's undergraduates were from American minority groups, including 5% African-Americans. Foreign students in that year hailed from

51 foreign countries.[102] At the Bryn Mawr School as well, continued movement beyond Thomas' flawed progressivism is evident. For the 1995-1996 school year 25% of the student body (K-12) are minority students, 88 of them African-Americans. In both cases, statistics for Jewish enrollment do not exist because religion is no longer seen as an acceptable inquiry on application forms.

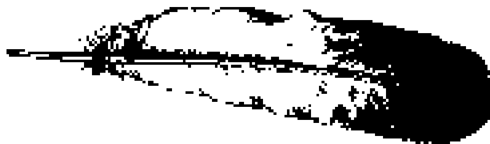
"The final irony of M. Carey Thomas' life," Rachel Eisler writes in the Winter 1994 edition of the *Bryn Mawr School Newsletter,* "is that she helped found a school, which, thankfully, is a more compassionate open-minded institution than she ever intended."[103] Perhaps. But it seems that the "better angels" of Thomas' nature, to borrow Lincoln's term, would have had it no other way. Thomas had a single visionary idea: that women, to quote her adolescent diary, "can learn can reason can compete" in the realm of higher education. That idea contains within it seeds of other visionary ideas; that perhaps race and religion are no more reasons to be denied access to the world's highest scholarship than is gender. The Bryn Mawr College Admissions office tries to capitalize on this idea in its pamphlet: "Most colleges and universities talk about 'diversity' these days, but few were founded to provide access to new populations (women, in Bryn Mawr's case) and as agents for social change."[104] Thomas, of course, was herself the "all too human muddle of brilliance and narrow-minded prejudice" that Eisler describes.[105]

When Thomas' legacy offers two conflicting answers to the same question, certainly the institutions she helped to create should look to her strains of "brilliance" for guidance in preference to her other "strains." To do any other would dishonor the higher Thomas who had an heroic vision and the higher Thomas who believed in progress. It would dishonor the Thomas who wrote in her diary in 1875: "Though man as an individual may fail of his end…yet the progress of the race is ever onward…one century finds the solution to the problem the former has been working out, each succeeding one finds the core of the diseases of the generation before. There must be progress."[106]

From the beginning, Thomas' vision for America did not match reality. Through her own education and through the institutions she helped to found, she brought America significantly closer to her progressive vision. Yet there remained elements of her personality that were utterly unprogressive, in some ways in opposition to her visionary self and in some ways a result of it. Though she sought to act on these elements in her capacities as an administrator, the institutions she created have since largely outgrown them. As Horowitz writes, "Ultimately she built better than she lived. The institutions that she created and the doors she opened for women remain as a lasting legacy."[107]

What does one say about such a woman? Ultimately the best words come from Thomas herself. While still studying in Europe in 1883, she was ambivalent when she learned that her Aunt Hannah had entertained the controversial, famous Walt Whitman in her parlor. "I am struck dumb at the thought," she wrote home "… to think that one of you should receive in your house the man who has written more grossly indecent things than perhaps any other man whose books are printed in an open manner…"[108] In the end however Thomas finds something undeniably appealing about Whitman: he thinks "outraging so called decency the right thing to do and does so in a whole-souled way which wins him my admiration, distasteful as it is."[109]

Thomas spent her life "outraging so called decency" in a "whole-souled way." As Horowitz writes "she did not [create herself] perfectly or at times even well. But she was heroic in the task she set."[110]



[1] Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, The Power and Passion of M. Carey Thomas (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994) p. 52

[2] Ibid., p. xvi

[3] Ibid., p. 12

[4] Ibid., p. 15

[5] Ibid., p. 26

[6] Ibid., p. 18

[7] Ibid., p. 24

[8] Marjorie Housepian Dobkin, ed., The Making of a Feminist: Early Journals and Letters of M. Carey Thomas Forward by Millicent Carey McIntosh (Kent: Kent State University Press, no date)

[9] Horowitz, p. 24

[10] Dobkin, p. 70

[11] Ibid., p. 51

[12] Frances B. Cogan, All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989) p. 83

[13] Horowitz, p. 18

[14] Dobkin, p. 44

[15] Ibid., p. 39

[16] Barbara Chase, "M. Carey Thomas and the 'Friday Night': A Case Study in Female Social Networks and Personal Growth," (Baltimore: A thesis submitted to the Johns Hopkins University in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Liberal Arts, 1990) p. 9

[17] Dobkin, p. 70

[18] Ibid., p. 70

[19] Ibid., p. 50

[20] Horowitz, p. 34

[21] Dobkin, p. 70

[22] Ibid., p. 58

[23] Ibid., p. 74

[24] Ibid., p. 58

[25] Ibid., p. 58

[26] Ibid., p. 58

[27] Horowitz, p. xvii

[28] Dobkin, p. 77; Horowitz, p. 36

[29] Horowitz, p. 49

[30] Dobkin, p. 100

[31] Horowitz, p. 58

[32] Ibid., p. 70

[33] Ibid., p. 70

[34] Ibid., p. 98
[35] Ibid., p. 103
[36] Ibid., p. 114
[37] Ibid., p. 110
[38] Ibid., p. 161
[39] Ibid., p. 96
[40] Chase, p. 14
[41] Horowitz, p. 71
[42] Ibid., p. 166
[43] Ibid., p. 198
[44] Ibid., p. 393
[45] Ibid., p. 158
[46] Ibid., p. 161
[47] Ibid., p. 164
[48] Ibid., p. 185
[49] Ibid., p. 257
[50] Ibid., pp. 257-262
[51] Ibid., p. 158
[52] M. Carey Thomas in Dobkin, p. 264
[53] Horowitz, p. 410
[54] Ibid., p. 256
[55] Ibid., pp. 242, 346
[56] Ibid., p. 265
[57] Ibid., p. 336
[58] Ibid., p. 389
[59] Ibid., p. 159
[60] Ibid., p. 228
[61] This document and its significance were brought to my attention by Horowitz, pp. 229, 482
[62] M. Carey Thomas, 1892, Bryn Mawr School Papers, Box 1
[63] Horowitz, p. 267
[64] Ibid., p. 232
[65] Ibid., p. 267
[66] Ibid., p. 229
[67] Ibid., p. 229
[68] Ibid., p. 234
[69] Ibid., p. 237
[70] Ibid., p. 434
[71] Ibid., p. 316
[72] Ibid., p. 320

[73] U. S. Bureau of the Census, Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970 House document—93rd Congress, 1st session; no. 93-78 (Washington: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Series H 751-765, "Institutions of Higher Education—Degrees Conferred, by Sex: 1870 to 1970," 1975) p. 386

[74] Horowitz, p. 313

[75] Ibid., p. 379

[76] Ibid., p. 267

[77] Tim Warren, "She Was a Woman Ahead of Her Time: M. Carey Thomas, the Power & Passion," The Evening Sun (September 4, 1994) p. 1J

[78] Ibid., p. 1J

[79] Horowitz, pp. 342, 343

[80] Ibid., p. 381

[81] Ibid., p. 341

[82] Ibid., p. 230

[83] Ibid., p. 231

[84] Thomas, 1890, Box 1

[85] Colvin, 1890, Box 1

[86] Lucy West, Introduction to the Bryn Mawr School Papers

[87] Bryn Mawr School Papers, Box 7

[88] Horowitz, p. 483

[89] Ibid., p. 231

[90] Ibid., p. 423

[91] Ibid., p. 422

[92] Ibid., p. 232

[93] Ibid., p. 241

[94] Alison Dray-Novey, Letter to Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, December 6, 1994

[95] Horowitz, p. 449

[96] U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1975, p. 386, and

U. S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States: National Data Book and Guide to Sources (Washington: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, No. 293, "Earned Degrees Conferred by Field of Study and Level of Degree: 1971 to 1990" p. 184; No. 294, "Degrees Conferred in Selected Professions: 1960 to 1990;" p. 185, [1993])

[97] U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1975, p. 386

[98] U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1993, p. 185

[99] Horowitz, p. xvi

[100] BMC, 1995

[101] Ibid.

[102] Ibid.

[103] Rachel Eisler, “Respect and Reservations,” Bryn Mawr School Newsletter (Winter 1994)

[104] BMC 1995

[105] Eisler

[106] Dobkin, p. 98

[107] Horowitz, p. xvii

[108] Ibid., p. 173

[109] Chase, p. 118

[110] Horowitz, p. xvii

Bibliography

Bryn Mawr College Office of Admissions, “Bryn Mawr: An Introduction,” and “Bryn Mawr,” Admissions Literature, 1995

Chase, Barbara, “M. Carey Thomas and the ‘Friday Night’: A Case Study in Female Social Networks and Personal Growth” Baltimore, 1990. A thesis submitted to the Johns Hopkins University in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Liberal Arts.

Cogan, Frances B., All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989

Dray-Novey, Alison, Letter to Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, December 6, 1994

Eisler, Rachel, “Respect and Reservations,” Bryn Mawr School Newsletter Winter 1994

Fee, Elizabeth, Linda Shopes and Linda Zeidman, eds., The Baltimore Book: New Views of Local History Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991

Hedrick, Joan D., “Book Reviews—The Power and Passion of M. Carey Thomas, by Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz,” Journal of American History September 1995

Horowitz, Helen Lefkowitz, The Power and Passion of M. Carey Thomas New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994

Leiter, Robert, "A Friend to Women, But Not to Jews," Jewish Exponent May 5, 1995

Ravitch, Diane, "Admirable and Despicable," The New York Times Book Review October 16, 1994

Sarna, Jonathan, "Outing Thomas: A Feminist Icon's Secret Anti-Semitism," The Forward V. LXXXXVIII; N.31, 007, p.1, December 23, 1994

Spears, Bessie, Bryn Mawr School Admissions Statistics, (conversation) 1996

Thomas, M. Carey, The Making of a Feminist: Early Journals and Letters of M. Carey Thomas, Marjorie Housepian Dobkin, ed. Forward by Millicent Carey McIntosh. Kent: Kent State University Press, c. 1879

United States Bureau of the Census, Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970, House document—93d Congress, 1st session; no. 93-78 Washington: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. Series H 751-765. "Institutions of Higher Education—Degrees Conferred, by Sex: 1870 to 1970" (p. 386) 1975

United States Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States: National Data Book and Guide to Sources Washington: U.S. Department of Commerce: U.S. Bureau of the Census. No.293. "Earned Degrees Conferred, by Field of Study and Level of Degree: 1971 to 1990." (p. 184), No. 294 "Degrees Conferred in Selected Professions: 1960 to 1990." (p. 185), 1993

Warren, Tim, "She Was a Woman Ahead of Her Time: M. Carey Thomas the Power & Passion," The Evening Sun Page 1J, September 4, 1994

West, Lucy, Introduction to the Bryn Mawr School Papers