

Gwyneth Marjory Bebb, Mrs Thomson (Jurisprudence, 1908)
1889-1921

Profile by Veronica Lowe (Modern History, 1969)



“By the death of Gwyneth Bebb (Mrs Weldon Thomson OBE) this country loses one of the most brilliant of its younger generation of women. Not, perhaps, known to a very wide circle, her exceptional gifts and depth of character left a deep impression on those with whom she came into contact . . . She had both great brilliance of intellect and a sound practical ability, combined with a sane and balanced judgment – qualities only rarely found together. She achieved her unvarying success in everything she undertook with an effortless ease which left the beholder gasping.”

Gwyneth Bebb Thomson’s obituary of 14 October 1921 in the foremost feminist magazine of the 1920s *The Women’s Leader*.

Her untimely death at the age of 31 cut short a brilliant legal career in which she is likely to have become the first woman barrister.

One of 8 children, Gwyneth was born in Brasenose College where her father the Rev. Dr. Llewellyn Bebb was a Fellow and later Vice Principal. When she was 9, the family moved to Wales as her father became Principal of St David’s College Lampeter (later part of the University of Wales), which trained Church of England clergy in logic, deduction and reasoning. Gwyneth therefore grew up in a large academic family with a supportive father, in an intellectually stimulating environment.

In 1906 she moved to St Mary’s School Paddington, established by an Anglican religious order as one of the earliest schools to reflect changing attitudes to women’s education. She took the precursor of the School Certificate and in 1908 went up from St Mary’s to what was then called St Hugh’s Hall in Oxford. Now St Hugh’s College, it had been founded in 1886 by Elizabeth Wordsworth for intelligent young women of modest means, particularly the daughters of Anglican clergymen, who could not afford the cost of Somerville or Lady Margaret Hall.

Gwyneth’s interesting decision to read Jurisprudence was by definition a lonely one as there were no other Jurisprudence students at St Hugh’s and about 400 men studying it at Oxford. There appear to have been no lawyers in the Bebb family and no female professionals such as a doctor. It was also said that Mrs Bebb took a less liberal approach to women’s education than her husband. As there was also no career route available for female law graduates, and only 6 women had previously studied Law at Oxford, it is not far-fetched to believe that Gwyneth by the age of 18 firmly intended to become one of the first women to force entry to the legal professions. This was the view expressed to the Lord Chancellor in 1920 by Lucy Nettlefold who became Gwyneth’s co-Plaintiff in *Bebb v The Law Society* [1914] 1 Ch 286.

In June 1911 Gwyneth Bebb became the first woman to obtain a First Class in Jurisprudence. Her obituary in *The Women's Leader* records that:

"She took a brilliant First in the School of Jurisprudence – it was stated on good authority that had the lists been published in order of merit her name would have been placed at the top".

Gwyneth was unable to be awarded her degree in 1911 as Oxford University did not confer them on women until 1920. However, on completing her studies, she was intriguingly offered the post of an Investigator attached to the Board of Trade, the regulatory body responsible for overseeing conditions and minimum wages in all businesses employing women, and prosecuting rogue employers.

As women did not have statutory sanction to enter the Civil Service until the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919, and most women working for government bodies tended to be clerks, this was a very interesting job offer to a 21-year-old.

This did not have the effect of deterring Gwyneth from a legal career. On 17 December 1912, 23-year-old Gwyneth Bebb, Lucy Nettlefold, Karin Costelloe and Maud Ingram via their solicitors requested the Law Society to be allowed to take the Preliminary Exams to become articled clerks. The Law Society promptly declined and returned the exam fees. The 4 Plaintiffs had some powerful political and legal support, and the first Bill to enable women to enter the legal professions was actually tabled early in 1913 although was unsuccessful.

With Gwyneth as the lead Plaintiff, the case of *Bebb v The Law Society* came to the High Court Chancery Division requesting a declaration that the female applicant was a "person" within the meaning of s. 2 of the Solicitors Act 1843:

"No person shall act as an Attorney or Solicitor [...] unless such Person shall after the passing of this Act be admitted and enrolled and otherwise duly qualified as an Attorney or Solicitor, pursuant to the Directions and Regulations of this Act."

Although s. 48 of the same Act enabled every word with the masculine gender to be applied to a female, it provided a "get out of jail free" card that this did not apply where that construction would be repugnant!

The case was dismissed on the basis that being a solicitor or attorney was a public office rather than a member of a private profession as contended on behalf of the Plaintiffs, and that as it was a long-established principle of common law that a woman was not a person, women were incapable of carrying out a public function.

In the Court of Appeal hearing before the Master of the Rolls in December 1913, the decision was that the 1843 Act could not be interpreted as including women as – through *"the inveterate practice of centuries"* women had never been admitted as attorneys. Furthermore, married women were not at absolute liberty to enter into binding contracts,

and so would be *“unfitted either for entering into articles or for contracting with their clients”*. For precedents, the Court of Appeal had delved back 300 years citing Sir Edward Coke, Lord Chief Justice to King James I and prosecutor of the Gunpowder Plotters. Ironically, Gwyneth was a descendant of Coke.

However, the Master of the Rolls remarked that, *“in point of intelligence and education and competency women – and in particular the applicant here, who is a distinguished Oxford student – are at least equal to a great many, and, probably, far better than many, of the candidates who will come up for examination.”*

The distinguished student was of course Gwyneth Bebb, if no longer studying at Oxford.

In February 1914 the “Committee to obtain the Opening of the Legal Profession to Women” was formed consisting of the 4 Plaintiffs, their solicitor and counsel, and their band of supporters within Parliament. Bills were again put forward, gradually gaining more powerful support. However, the Law Society again decided to oppose the legislation in April 1914. The outbreak of war brought these attempts to a standstill.

Gwyneth remained with the Board of Trade as a senior investigator until March 1917. In the family memorabilia is a fascinating news report of a detailed lecture she gave on the comparison between the German and UK economies and technical education systems at a public meeting on the “War on Germany’s Trade” to a distinguished and largely male audience. Described by the chairman as brilliant and *“holding an important post at the Board of Trade, she had passed one of the highest examinations in law with distinction and was singularly competent to speak on the important question.”* It was a very interesting vote of confidence in a woman still in her 20s who does not sound as if she had remained in a low-level inspection role.

In 1917 one argument in favour of women entering the legal professions was that Board of Trade inspectors had for years been successfully conducting their own cases and doing their own cross-examination.

Gwyneth also found the time to marry Thomas Weldon Thomson, a Tewkesbury solicitor, on 26 April 1917. It is noteworthy that Weldon as he was always known, though 17 years older than Gwyneth and a mere 10 years younger than her father, obviously had no problem in encouraging and supporting his wife’s ambitions.

For 6 months in 1917 Gwyneth as Mrs Thomson was Commissioner of the W. Midland Division of the newly-established National Service for Women, then Assistant Commissioner for Enforcement for the Ministry of Food, Midland Division until August 1920. Her role was in prosecuting black marketeers for food profiteering. There were a small handful of women like Gwyneth in these roles such as her co-Plaintiff Lucy Nettlefold. Gwyneth worked in government service until 1920 - despite the marriage bar which remained in existence until 1946 and also despite being the mother of a small child. Again, none of this deterred her from pursuing her ambition of becoming legally-qualified.

In early 1917 both the Bar and the Law Society were requested by individual members to consider preparing for the admission of suitably qualified women. The Law Society President viewed this as premature before the return of the 3000 solicitors and many articled clerks serving in the armed forces. Further moves were made to introduce parliamentary Bills, and in March 1917 Lord Buckmaster, the King's Counsel and former Lord Chancellor who had originally represented the Plaintiffs, introduced the Solicitors (Qualification of Women) Bill in the House of Lords. It ultimately passed all stages, and even the Archbishop of Canterbury voted in its favour.

The Committee to obtain the Opening of the Legal Profession to Women mounted a Press campaign to bring the Bill forward in the Commons. The Prime Minister David Lloyd George received an influential deputation urging the long-deferred reform, emphasising that in most of the British Dominions the disqualification had already been removed as it had in the US, Russia and 7 European countries. It was also pointed out that the bereavement and loss caused by war forced many women to work for a living, an interesting counter-argument to that of the Law Society President in 1917.

Indeed, even the Law Society President made the following request to his Council in 1918:

"I ask every member of the profession to consider this matter seriously, and to ask whether, considering the spirit of the times towards the status of women in the industrial world, considering the work women have done in connection with the war, considering the political rights women have obtained, it is possible any longer to maintain an opposition to their entrance into a profession in which they are already employed as clerks, and of their fitness to practise which no thoughtful person would venture now to express a doubt."

One of the women who had made that recognisable contribution to the war effort was Gwyneth Bebb Thomson. For her prosecution work with the Ministry of Food she was one of the first women to be awarded the OBE in 1921, aged only 31.

During the campaign for women to enter the legal professions, Gwyneth had changed her focus to the Bar and applied unsuccessfully to Lincoln's Inn to be a student in 1918. Her application was referred to as *"a communication from a Lady"*. She applied again unsuccessfully in 1919. However, the recognition of the female contribution to the war effort, and the 7- year-old campaign with ever-growing support led ineluctably to the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919 given Royal Assent on 23 December 1919.

That month was momentous for Gwyneth for 2 reasons and heralded the year of 1920 as one of success and celebration. Firstly, her daughter with Weldon, named Alice Diana Broughton Thomson, was born on the day of Royal Assent to the Act. Secondly, the Benchers of Lincoln's Inn accepted Gwyneth's application for admission as a student on the next day. Because of the baby's birth, Gwyneth was not able to travel to Lincoln's Inn to post her Bond until 27 January 1920, very shortly after 2 other women had been admitted by the Inns of Court as students. Gwyneth's long-time supporters Lord Buckmaster and her solicitor Mr Withers signed her Bond.

As she wrote to her sister Catherine on 23 May 1920, she *“crept up to Town and dined in Hall and kept my first term (3 dinners a term is all that is required and therefore all I am doing at present). We had a great Dinner at the House of Commons at the beginning of March (the one you saw reported) when all the legal nuts turned up – and I had to propose the Toast of the Bar to which the Attorney-General responded – quite a lark but very alarming.”*

What should be borne in mind is that Gwyneth submitted her application to Lincoln’s Inn in the final stages of her pregnancy, and went to London from Tewkesbury to be formally admitted leaving behind her one-month-old daughter. The celebratory Bar Dinner took place when the child was just over 2 months old. These were the determined actions of a 30-year-old married woman in 1920, not 2020.

Gwyneth obtained a First class in Criminal Law and Procedure in the summer Bar exams. In addition, in October 1920 she was awarded her degree by Oxford University and automatically became an M.A. due to the elapse of time since she matriculated as a student of the University.

It was also a watershed. Gwyneth became pregnant for the second time in early 1921. She was confined to bed in July because a premature birth of the baby was feared. She herself told her sister on 26 July that she had *“been leaping about the country in the most awful heat we have ever had”*. On 10 August Gwyneth was admitted to the nursing home where she had given birth to her 19-month-old daughter Alice Diana. She was suffering from placenta praevia. The baby, a little girl called Marion, died on 12 August; and Gwyneth herself died on 9 October 1921 just before her 32nd birthday.

A memorial window at her old school was paid for by subscription, with the fundraising letter referring to her as *“brilliant in promise . . . (with) rare charm of personality with the capacity and judgment of a truly fine mind, always at the service of others.”*

There were also obituaries in all major newspapers national and provincial, many featuring the best-known photo of Gwyneth holding her daughter Alice Diana.

Gwyneth Bebb Thomson was clearly a woman of of courage, determination and visionary thinking. She was also a charming and gifted person, not simply a banner headline in the history of legal pioneers.