

Dr Evelyn Simpson (née Spearing, English, 1920)

1885-1963

Dr Evelyn Simpson was the first woman to be awarded a DPhil at Oxford.

Born in Cambridge on 2 September 1885, Evelyn was educated at the Perse School, Cambridge and completed her undergraduate studies at Newnham College, University of Cambridge, where she achieved a First in Medieval and Modern Languages in 1908. She went on to teach at Bedford College, London University, before becoming a research fellow of Newnham College in 1911.

Evelyn was working on research on Elizabethan drama, and an edited collection of John Donne's poems which had been accepted for publication, when war broke out in 1914. With her poetry collection cancelled, she joined the war effort to work as a Voluntary Aid Department nurse. She received the Star Medal, the British War Medal and the Victory Medal for her work.

Evelyn was appointed a tutor in English Literature at St Hugh's in 1919, the year before the first DPhil degrees were awarded by the University and women were first admitted as full members. She took full advantage of the new opportunities opened up by the University to aspiring researchers and was conferred her DPhil for her thesis on John Donne in 1922, the first woman to be awarded this degree. She published a study of the prose works of John Donne based on her doctoral thesis in 1924.

As was usual for the time, Evelyn gave up her position at St Hugh's on her marriage in 1921, but she continued her academic research throughout her life, editing and publishing in collaboration with academic colleagues including her husband, Percy Simpson. Together, she and her husband worked on an eleven-volume edition of Ben Jonson's work over a period of thirty years, completed in 1952. Their editorial collaboration was described as 'one of the most remarkable partnerships in the history of scholarship' (*The Times*, 12 September 1963).

In 1946 she returned to Newnham College, Cambridge to take up a research fellowship, and she was supervisor of Advanced Studies for the BLitt and DPhil in Oxford in 1950.

Her final work was a definitive ten-volume edition of John Donne's sermons, which she worked on with Professor George Potter of the University of California at Berkeley, who passed away after the first volume was published in 1953, leaving Evelyn to finish the work alone.

Evelyn Simpson died of heart failure on 7 September 1963.

Sources

Phillips, D., 'Simpson [*née* Spearing], Evelyn Mary', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004)

Soutter, Ann, and Mary Clapinson, eds, *St Hugh's College Register 1886-1959* (Oxford: St Hugh's College, 2011)

Obituary for Evelyn Spearing in *The Times*, Thursday 12 September 1963

Exhibition 'Celebrating the DPhil Centenary, 1919-2019', Graduate Admissions and Recruitment, University of Oxford (currently on display in Hamlin Gallery, St Hugh's College). For further information on this centenary, see <https://www.ox.ac.uk/dphil-centenary>.