A star student in Michigan's first generation of women searches for her calling and comes of age in the “dangerous experiment” of coeducation.
On her 21st birthday—Sept. 15, 1871—a drizzly day in upstate New York, Mary Downing Sheldon boarded the train in her home town of Oswego, secured her luggage and settled into her seat. The locomotive hitched forward, then gathered speed, and soon the view from her window shifted from the swamp maple and sumac of the Lake Ontario shoreline to the long salt sheds outside Syracuse. After weeks of preparation, she was on her way.

“I Start For the New Life”—the long wished-for university,” she wrote in her diary. “University! What visions has that word not always brought to mind, of learned professors, of new and charming knowledges, of antique buildings crowned with historic associations…

“I watched the gray flying landscape through the dark night; and ‘college’ sounded clear through all, even when we crossed the suspension bridge [at Niagara] over the far, deep chasm.”

“The day was rainy and dark,” she recalled later, “but could not quench in its gray mists the joys of that great adventure.” When the night came she opened the window to let the wind blow in her face.

By her own description she was short and “well-knit” (131 pounds, she told her mother), with large blue eyes and thick, dark-brown hair. The oldest of four children, she was an idealist with a practical streak, a shrewd judge of character who nonetheless could be swept away by people she admired. Her mother was a learned woman who had raised her on books and explorations of the woods and fields. Her father was a progressive educator who was urging Mary toward a writer’s life.

Classical studies and the realm of nature and science fascinated her equally. One of her earliest memories was of her mother holding her at the window at night, pointing to the dark sky and saying: “The stars are all worlds, are all suns, like our world, our sun.” Mary recalled an instantaneous and “infinite longing to know the bright worlds, every one,” and an awakening to “the energy and joy” of an engaged mind. To devote her time wholly to reading, thought and discussion with learned scholars was no less than her idea of bliss.

After high school she had taught for two years at her father’s teacher-training academy, the State Normal and Preparatory School (forerunner of the State University of New York-Oswego). She yearned for further study and made plans to take a degree in Germany. But after an exchange of letters across the Atlantic, she was told that “Germany, like Yale and Harvard, was not yet ready for a woman.”

Then one day she opened a copy of “The Independent,” a popular magazine, to find a headline: “College Career for Women.” “I remember the very look of the page,” she wrote later, “the very place and length of the article. It gave an account of Michigan University, which had just been opened to women, and which was fast-approaching its present high rank. I knew in a moment that my hour had come.”

* * *

Pressure to open the University of Michigan to women had begun to build 20 years earlier, in the decade before the Civil War. But the vision of Henry Philip Tappan, U-M’s first president and in most ways its founding figure, had emphatically not included coeducation. Like many men on elite college faculties, he believed women possessed neither the intellect nor the physical stamina required for advanced study. The natural order predestined girls for motherhood and housekeeping, so what would be the point? Women seeking equal rights would “fail to become men,” Tappan wrote to a friend. “They will be something mongrel, hermaphroditic,” while men would be “dems-culated…. When we attempt to disturb God’s order we produce monstrosities.”

But the imperious Tappan, never broadly popular in the state, was pressured to resign in 1863, and some in the faculty began to rethink the case for women. “The present age is…narrowing female privileges to a more fearful extent than any other since medieval times,” wrote Alexander Winchell, an influential professor. “I have long been growing into the conviction that we are consenting to a wrong.”

The Michigan legislature declared that “the high objects for which the University of Michigan was organized will never be fully attained until women are admitted to all its rights and privileges.” Still the University resisted. Then, in 1870, a new crop of Regents and a new president, James Burrill Angell, agreed it was time to try what some called “the dangerous experiment” of coeducation.

That fall, the daughter of a college professor, Madelon Stockwell, became the first woman officially enrolled, and the University published notices inviting more young women to apply. Thirty-four of them, Mary Sheldon among them, enrolled in the fall of 1871—34 women in a student body of 1,021.
Mary’s dream of a classic academic grove in the West deflated as soon as her carriage left the Ann Arbor depot and climbed the steep slope of North State Street. She saw a pleasant but commonplace town—“hack drivers, ordinary people…here a livery stable, there a mill. As we drive along, it seems strange that all things look so common on such a very uncommon morning.” But she liked her first glimpse of the University itself, then 30 years old, the “quiet-colored, plain, large buildings in the wide and level campus, their square outlines softened or concealed by tall and richly-growing trees.” On State Street she could see construction under way at the site of University Hall, the great domed class-room building that soon would dominate the campus.

At the corner of Division and Jefferson she found her boarding house—a roomy place with a yard for croquet—and met her landlady, Mrs. Dennis, and her new housemates, four men and three women, all students. In her “two neat little rooms…with sky-ey views” she quickly felt “a wonderful sense of house-holding.” To keep her little library she bought three black walnut bookshelves for $1.50 and hung them from the ceiling with scarlet cord. On the walls she tacked favorite old drawings of Mother Goose rhymes from home. “I am very happy,” she wrote her parents, with “only a little touch of homesickness.”

She took quickly to her roommate, Isabel Perry. She found Mrs. Dennis’s cooking “perfect.” “Everyone seems to like me, and I am sure I like everyone and everything… I believe I was born happy.”

But Mary’s frothy good nature was to be tested in Ann Arbor. In her early schooling she had been a star. And she wanted more than anything else to prove her prowess as a scholar and writer in a renowned university. But for all her ambition, she harbored a nagging, silent doubt: Could women really compete with men in the pursuit of higher learning?

“I never said it,” she admitted to her mother several years later, but “when I came [to Ann Arbor] I had but little faith in women’s power intellectually,” and she disapproved of “radical” women who “had none of that respectful belief in masculine superiority which I thought every woman should have.”

Now she was a specimen in the experiment of coeducation.

* * *

The campus was a domain of males, from the faculty’s gray patriarchs to the condescending young professors fresh from the Ivy League to the braying freshmen barely out of adolescence. Male ritual and male decorum, or lack thereof, predominated.

On the first day of class, Mary and the other newcomers opened the doors of the chapel hall to be greeted by a prolonged roar of throaty noise. It was the “Yell” that greeted entering students every fall—no gentlemanly exception for the ladies—with apple cores flying back and forth above the crowd, breaking windows and a framed portrait of Washington. When the professors filed in, “the wild confusion grew still wilder.” Mary wrote, “and they stamped and clapped and yelled and hissed and transformed themselves into a whole wild menagerie.”

The women were under close scrutiny. People literally stared—Ann Arborites on the street, professors at their lecterns, male students in the corridors. In class one day Mary glanced to her side and was astonished to see two young men in the yard outside, their faces pressed to the window, apparently just to catch a glimpse of women actually sitting in a University classroom.

The women students were eyeing each other, too, on the lookout for anyone who might undermine coeducation by a show of low standards, academic or otherwise.

“Our standard is high and they are very watchful,” Mary told her parents, “not only of their own actions and standing, but also that of others. If any girl comes below that standard, she is talked to and pleaded with…until she does better or leaves.” One “co-ed” who had become engaged was frowned upon, and even one who became ill caused consternation, “because people will say, you know, that we break down under hard study—and on and on…”

Gradually she became accustomed to the rowdies around her. One day she would half-enjoy “their wild savagery”; the next she would feel “perfectly sick” of living among “so many masculines.”

Boys would be boys, she knew. More important was the question of how the faculty would deal with women students, especially those professors who had fought the admission of women.

One of these was Edward Olney, Mary’s professor in mathematics, her least favorite subject. In one of the first meetings of the class, she misplaced a decimal point on the blackboard, and Olney cracked a joke about it that made all the men in the room laugh.

Distinction was the best revenge. Mary’s early performance raised professors’ eyebrows. When placement exams were given, she scored extremely well in every subject but Greek. Even Olney took notice. When she handed in her placement exam in mathematics, he skimmed it and gave an approving grunt. As she left the room, she heard him mumble, “Humph… pretty good habits of thought.”
President Angell himself told her the news: “I guess there is no doubt, Miss Sheldon, from all that I hear, but that you will go into Sophomore.” She had placed out of an entire year.

“That made me happy and touched me too,” she told her sister, “so that I went away with tears in my eyes. Not brought there by Prof. Olney and the staring young college boys, you ‘bet.’”

Within weeks, she made an outright fan of Olney, who proved a better gentleman than he had seemed at first. One day he conceded she must have “had splendid training somewhere” and even that he “wished they had a thousand such.”

It was the students who clung to all-male dogma.

One morning at chapel, all students were invited to attend meetings of the literary clubs that met every Friday evening. But when several women, including Mary, appeared at the inaugural meeting of the Adelphi Society, the most prestigious of the groups, they were treated to a mournful address by the Adelphi’s student president. He voiced deep doubts about the propriety of women attending meetings and sniffed that there were few enough men, let alone women, who spoke and wrote well enough to take part. Mary claimed to find his remarks “very funny,” and as a group, the women decided the Adelphi held no further attraction for them.

Mary’s father, Edward Austin Sheldon, was deeply interested in questions of educational policy. When he asked her opinion of coeducation, she replied that there were simply too few women on campus to give any settled judgment. Michigan remained essentially a men’s college with a mere sprinkling of women, she said. A kind of embarrassment seemed to have come over the men. Many kept their distance from the college women. The women simply went about their business. Those brave enough to enroll in that first year of coeducation were hardly there to have fun.

“The students are very gentlemanly, but let us severely alone,” Mary wrote her father. “It is a matter of great surprise to me if I see a lady and gentleman student talking together. There are no rules whatever in regard to the matter, of course, but the utmost coolness, consistent with the fact that we attend the same classes, exists. And yet there is no ill-feeling between ladies and gentlemen… The young ladies, especially, seem to think that they are here to learn…

“The [male] students seem ashamed of being seen in ladies’ company at all and generally go off by themselves… College is the very last place where a young lady would go to receive attention from gentlemen.

“My theoretical opinion is the same now as ever, that ladies and gentlemen should be educated together.”
“I wish there were not so many boys here,” she told her sister Lizzie. “I feel very much out of place…. But do not think that I am a victim and a martyr. For I am not. I have precisely what I want. I am in a University and have a chance to see it all from the inside.”

She fell into a comfortable routine. On a typical day of classes she would rise early, bathe, breakfast, and study for an hour before the quick walk to campus for morning chapel in South Hall (about where the south wing of Angell Hall stands now). Here President Angell led a prayer, made announcements, and led the students in a hymn (“splendid with so many male voices”). She hurried home to study for the rest of the morning, then read Greek with her stern and serious housemate Sarah Hamlin. Classes were in the afternoon—Greek, Horace, mathematics, geography, and history, depending on the day. Then more study until tea, followed by an errand or two, and in the evening, more study, calls on professors and their wives at home, or a church “sociable,” or a meeting of the little Shakespeare society that she and some new friends had formed. (“I am secretary as usual.”) They would read aloud for an hour, then play “Proverbs” or “Twenty Questions” until time for bed.

“You do not know how happy I am,” she rejoiced in one of her weekly letters to her close friend at home, Mary Alling. “I spend my days in a perpetual comparison of the adjective ‘happy.’” All through her early months at Michigan, she was astonished and enchanted to find herself in a setting that seemed so perfectly suited to her gifts and ambitions. Ann Arbor, she wrote, was “Home of the Blest.”

At first Mary was not much impressed by the teaching she encountered at Michigan. At her father’s academy in Oswego, she had been raised on the progressive educational ideas of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, a Swiss reformer who urged the teaching of “children, not subjects.” She had been taught to dig for the roots of academic problems and arrive at answers on her own. Now, too often, she ran into the old-fashioned reliance on memorization and drill—“slave work,” she called it. She nearly laughed out loud one day when her young tutor in Greek presented the grammar lesson and urged his charges to “learn it just as though you were parrots”—precisely the jibe she had often heard Pestalozzians level at rote learning. “I almost feel as though I were losing the power to think the way I used to… For the first time in my life I hate study.”

**CHAPTER 3**

**“Do Not Think I Am a Victim”**

But that passed. If her Greek professor was a dry bore, Mary soon discovered wonderfully alive minds on the faculty, too. For a time she was fascinated by Professor Benjamin Franklin Cocker, a Christian philosopher whom she called, only half-laughingly, her “high priest and interpreter of the Universe.” But the professor who made the deepest impression was Moses Coit Tyler.

During his dozen years at Michigan, Tyler was a professor of English who blazed trails in the study of literature in its historical and political contexts. Later, he would join the history faculty at Cornell and help to found the American Historical Association. Mary attended his lectures and soon pronounced him “a Pestalozzian in spirit”—high praise—and began to ask his advice. Evidently she made an impression on him, too. “He advises me to read Shaw’s Manual of English Literature” she wrote her father. “You have it at home, I am quite sure, and I would like to have it sent to me. Prof. Tyler is very kind and told me to talk to him freely and ask advice at any time.”

Before long it was a case of hero worship: “Prof. Tyler is a perfect inspiration. I never can be too thankful that I have had the privilege of learning from such a man. The happiest hour of all the day is when four o’clock comes and I climb the four flights of stairs to the room where the western sun shines in over dingy walls, and when the master, with his fine face and sympathetic heart, teaches us the grace, the power, the fine artistic use of words in language which is unrhymed and unmeasured poetry. He is…an ideal gentleman as well as a noble man… His ready wit, his fine art of speaking, his clear but poetical language, his original thought and independence of authority save that of his own ideas and researches, render his lectures almost too good to be appreciated by sophomores. He treats us as equals.”

But in the spring of 1872, she was beginning to think that, despite her father’s hopes, she did not want to follow Professor Tyler into the study of literature. She was hatching a new scheme.
Mary loved to take long walks into the countryside, often with her friend Ruth Hull, a medical student. They would wander “in among pumpkin-piles and apple-orchards and cornstalks and working men and rail fences and nut trees… I am continually coming upon some new and beautiful place around this charming Ann Arbor.”

On one such hike near the end of her first year, she sat alone on a hill above the Huron River, thinking. Signs of spring surrounded her—the air softening; the river shed of its winter ice; birds and insects stirring in the green canopies overhead—so much more enchanting than the tedious discipline of studying subjects she did not care about.

“It was not a fleeting plan.” For weeks, she couldn’t “get it off my mind that I was made for it.” In the evenings she was plunging into debates over Darwin’s theory of evolution with her housemates, “believing it just enough to defend it.” Soon she informed her parents that she meant to study zoology. Earlier generations would force her to do dissections, but she said, “I shrink from it as I never shrank from anything before.”

A friend advised her to face her fear by taking a course that would force her to do dissections, but she said, “I shrink from it as I never shrank from anything before.”

She stayed with science a while longer. But she gave up “beasts and birds and creeping things” in favor of physics, chemistry, mineralogy and botany.
One morning that fall, there was an announcement: All women students were invited to meet at 4 p.m. in the old chapel.

“What are those girls going to do now?” a few of the men asked—then added “some brilliant conjectures,” one of the women scoffed.

Several women wanted a chance to know each other better. “Each class…was interested in its own work,” one of them recalled, “and with most of us, our work took all our time and thought. We learned each other by sight in chapel, but there was no crowded waiting room, no chance for introductions. Our acquaintance was limited to those few whom we met every day in recitation and even this acquaintance was slight. Surely it was time for us to be something more than so many disconnected human machines.”

They met that afternoon but couldn’t settle on a plan. Then, after the meeting adjourned, “some of the more zealous ones remained in the room and our brilliant little friend, Miss Sheldon of ’74, moved that we ought to ‘be something.’” The motion carried unanimously.

The club they formed became known as the Quadrantic Circle. It was the first women’s organization at Michigan, forerunner of the Michigan League and the sororities. Members included Alice Freeman, who would become one of Michigan’s most distinguished alumnae, the first woman president of a nationally known college (Wellesley); Olive San Louie Anderson, who would publish a novel based on her experiences at Michigan, “An American Girl and Her Four Years in a Boys’ College;” Mary’s first-year study partner, Sarah Dix Hamlin, who would found an important girls’ preparatory school in San Francisco; and Laura Rogers White, whom Mary called “the finest mathematician in college.”

Laura White had followed her older brother to U-M from Kentucky just to take a few courses. Well over six feet tall, she had been saddled with a dreadful nickname—“Alba Longa,” after a Greek isle. President Angell had recognized her brilliance in mathematics, and Mary had persuaded him to pursue a diploma. She became the first woman to earn a bachelor of science degree from Michigan.

College life, then as now, forged friendships out of students with divergent backgrounds and clashing values. Mary was the daughter of a Yankee intellectual, Laura White the daughter of a Kentucky hill farmer. But the larger difference between them was religious, and it caused Mary pain.

“There is a great deal of interest here in religious questions,” Mary wrote home, “and the deepest things are brought out boldly and discussed openly.”

Mary, brought up as a firm Presbyterian believer, found her childhood faith challenged by these discussions, and she came to think it “dangerous” for parents and preachers to “conceal the real difficulties of our creeds,” such as the inerrancy of the Bible. Yet she held fast to foundational Christian doctrine, and she was shocked to learn that Laura White believed in “a bad God who… delights in Creation as a mere amusement;” that “there was no improvement in the human race” and “no praise or blame to be attached to any deed… I can’t bear to think of her state of mind following such horrible beliefs… I have talked with her but one can do nothing with one who denies moral responsibility and the goodness of God.”

On some days she could scarcely believe that her best college friend was “a rank infidel,” another housemate “a regular scoffer,” and “all the gentlemen at [my] table perfectly willing to joke on very sacred subjects.”

But of course her world was being enlarged by these clashes of belief and background. It was enlarged, too, by friendships with men.

In those days before men’s and women’s dormitories, it was not at all unusual for male and female students to share a boarding house, and Mary became close to several male housemates, especially a Cuban, Mr. d’Aubique, “just the light of the house, so merry and cheerful is he,” and Mr. Mills, whom she came to think of as “just the same as a brother.” By her senior year, she commanded two or three “dear little innocent freshmen” who ran her errands and thanked her for the privilege.

As for romance, Mary had her share of invitations to “sociables” and sleigh rides. She accepted happily, and at least once she pronounced herself drunk at a party. She indulged in a few deliberate flirtations, but only for fun. By the middle of her second year, she had sworn off matrimony altogether.
CHAPTER 6

“We Will Stand On Equal Ground”

The evidence is scattered in fragments through Mary’s college letters and journals, but it appears she nourished a deep-seated and unrequited love for one man for a long time. It’s not clear whether he lived in Ann Arbor or at home in New York, and she never referred to him by name in writing, even to her closest friend, Mary Alling, saying only that “it will be impossible for me to care for any man except _____.”

But this attachment warred with another impulse, just as strong, toward an independent life as a woman working for the good of other women.

A century and a half later, we tend to associate early feminism with the voting-rights campaigns of the early 20th century. But currents of feminism were moving in the U.S. long before that, and they played a powerful role in Mary’s years in Ann Arbor.

She listened, fascinated, to feminist sermons from her second landlady, a formidable woman named Foster, who lectured “her girls” on “the slavery of women to the lust and drunkenness of men, on the power of the ballot and education, especially the former, to free them, and on the millenial epoch when man and woman, husband and wife, should be one in counsel, one in action, and one in love.” (When one of Mary’s housemates, a young married woman, asked Mrs. Foster whether a wife couldn’t persuade her husband to reform himself, Foster replied: “Persuade him? Persuade that stove!”)

Mary had long talks with the women considered the most radical on campus, “strong, free women,” most of them medical students, and became friends with two of them, Clara Armstrong and a Miss Lee. For a time their zeal intimidated her: “Although I admire their strength and freedom with all my heart, yet I can’t persuade her husband to reform himself, Foster replied: “Persuade him? Persuade that stove!”

As Commencement approached in the spring of 1874, she was overcoming any lingering “fear and trembling” about devoting herself to the advancement of her sex. Her father hoped she would return to his Oswego Normal school to teach young women, and she embraced a plan to do so for two years, then take advanced training in science. “I am thankful that at last I see our ability, other things being equal, is equal to that of man. College education alone has given men an immense intellectual advantage over us. The culture and discipline of business has given him a still greater one. But we will soon stand on equal ground and give man that intelligent love and trust which he has rarely known…”

She was now “in rapport with some of the strongest, most radical and earnest women here,” she told her mother. This was when she admitted that upon coming to Michigan, she had held secret doubts about women’s intellectual equality with men. “But now everything is changed… I have come to believe that everywhere our ability, other things being equal, is equal to that of man. College education alone has given men an immense intellectual advantage over us. The culture and discipline of business has given him a still greater one. But we will soon stand on equal ground and give man that intelligent love and trust which he has rarely known…”

As Commencement approached in the spring of 1874, she was overcoming any lingering “fear and trembling” about devoting herself to the advancement of her sex. Her father hoped she would return to his Oswego Normal school to teach young women, and she embraced a plan to do so for two years, then take advanced training in science. “I am thankful that at last I see a way clear to doing some actual good,” she wrote Mary Alling. “Just now, I could do no better nor find a larger field of work than in our Normal [school].”

“I no longer feel so deeply the need of love. My soul’s motherhood shall be satisfied by the dear girls God will give me strength to save.”

In her last days at the University, she wrote, “I cannot think of it without tears… Now that I am leaving it, I realize fully how much I have loved it all, the very campus ground is dear, the college walls and walks are well-beloved friends; all things are glorified in the near farewell.”

On June 24, 1874, Michigan’s 30th annual commencement, President Angell handed Mary her diploma.
Sarah Dix Hamlin, Mary’s first-year housemate and study partner, taught at a high school in Detroit and a mining camp in Nevada before helping to found a school for child widows in India. In 1896 she took charge of what became the Hamlin School in San Francisco. As its leader for nearly 30 years, she built it into a leading independent academy for girls.

Early in her medical career, Mary’s friend Ruth Hull suffered a nervous breakdown, moved to a commune of radical reformers in New Jersey, took up alternative medicine and vegetarianism and rejected the restrictive conventions of Victorian dress, including her corset.

Laura Rogers White studied architecture at MIT and a leading school in Paris. “I expected to be a teacher of mathematics, or possibly an architect, and prepared for that,” she wrote many years later. “My father’s death made that not best for the family, so to be with my mother and do best for my sisters, I relinquished those ambitions. But my college education has helped me to help others in many ways…and has broadened my views and given me the power to enjoy the best in literature and art.”

After leaving Ann Arbor, Mary Sheldon taught at the Oswego academy for two years, then became a college professor, first at Wellesley, then at Stanford University. She became not a scientist but a historian. Using the hands-on approach to teaching she had learned as a girl, and perhaps inspired by her first hero at Michigan, the historian Moses Coit Tyler, she became a pioneer in inquiry-based learning—the use of original historical documents that students studied to explore the past and solve questions on their own. She wrote and published several books.

In 1885 she married Earl Barnes, a former student, who went with her to teach at Stanford. They had no children. Her impact on students can be guessed from a letter one of them wrote to her. The young woman thanked Mary for her help and asked: “Do you know that you save[d] me from being a coward?”

Mary died of heart disease in London in 1898. She was 48 years old.

– James Tobin

This article was drawn chiefly from materials in the papers of Mary Sheldon Barnes, which are held in the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College, Northampton, MA. Mary’s papers include her letters to her parents, siblings and Mary Alling, as well as scrapbooks and memorabilia from her years at Michigan.

© 2013 by the Regents of the University of Michigan