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Laura Drake Gill Biography

Barnard History

Laura Drake Gill, born August 24th 1860 in Chesterville, Maine, served as Barnard’s third dean and was one of the worst fit deans for the college. Though she had the educational requirements and was well travelled before taking the position at Barnard, she lacked the skills needed to work with the Columbia administration and appeal to the Barnard Board of Trustees. In addition, while she strived and impart succeed to bring the structured campus life that she found at her alma mater Smith College to Barnard, she still faced criticism for the being too involved with the student body. By the time of her appointment Barnard already began to establish a reputation as being an urban women’s college that encouraged professionalism. Later in her career, Gill certainly supported women in the workforce, but her disapproving attitude towards having both a marriage and a career proved to be off-putting to the Barnard community, particularly the alumnae.

Gill graduated from Smith College in 1881 and while there she focused her studies on math. After graduating from Smith, Gill became a faculty member of Miss Capen’s School for girls, which her aunt ran. She taught math there for 17 years. During that time, she took a leave of absence to receive a master’s degree from Smith in 1885. She also travelled to Europe to study at the University of Leipzig in Germany, the University of Geneva in Switzerland, and the Sorbonne in Paris from 1890-93. She continued her studies at University of the South and gained her doctorate degree in civil law.

When the Spanish-American War started in 1898, Gill joined the Red Cross and led the first group of nurses to be sent to Cuba. Later in her life, she continued her involvement in nursing by working in army hospitals in Tennessee and New York. After the war ended, she stayed in Cuba to set up schools and give aid, specifically housing and education, to Cuban orphans.

In 1901 she became the third dean of Barnard College. Despite her seventeen years of teaching at the high school level, spending several years at universities abroad, and wartime organizational experience, Gill faced skepticism from the academia community. The Columbia president at the time of her appointment, Seth Low, received word that the Wellesley president, Alice Freeman Palmer, called Gill a, “woman built on a large plane” and Harvard’s president, Charles Eliot, believed she wouldn’t be “winning to cultivate girls” (*Achieving Voice*, Walton). These remarks can be found in the Columbia Rare Books and Manuscripts Room. However, Low approved the appointment due to her past experiences and remarked, "it is because Miss Gill’s experience has touched life so broadly that I am especially hopeful she will fit harmoniously into the Columbia atmosphere” (*Achieving Voice*, Walton).

Even though she worked for Barnard, she maintained close ties with Smith College by becoming the president of the Smith Alumnae Association of New York City in 1901. From her experience at Smith, Gill not only valued a vibrant student life, but she also valued campus structure for Barnard students. The campus size also expanded to three-and-a-half acres due to Elizabeth Milbank Anderson’s donation. With the help of John D. Rockefeller, the Barnard endowment increased to over half a million dollars. Over the course of her seven year deanship she helped create Barnard’s first dorm, Brooks Hall, and the bachelor of Science degree. In regards to the student body, she encouraged student self-government and prioritized the establishment of Barnard dorms. In further examples of the development of the Barnard student body under Gill, according to the book *Alma Mater: Design and Experience in the Women’s Colleges from Their Nintheenth-Century Beginnings to the 1930’s* by Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, “The newspaper *Mortarboard*, class athletic rivalries, college dramatics, the Christian Association, and freshman hazing seized hold of Barnard students as firmly as those of Smith” (Horowitz, 252).

However, despite these advancements, the tension between her and Columbia’s president, Nicholas Murray Butler, caused her to resign. The two faced challenges to effectively work together and Gill struggled to communicate between Columbia and the Barnard Board of Trustees. In regards to Gill’s impact on student life, her successor, Dean Gildersleeve, disapproved and criticized her in her memoir *Many a Good Crusade* for striving to act like a “mother” to independent seeking Barnard women (Horowitz, 255). Gill also faced turbulence in regards to the married lives of Barnard female faculty members, as seen in the case of Professor Harriet Brooks. Brooks, a physics professor, wrote to Gill in July of 1906 stating that she would be marrying the Columbia physics professor, Bergen Davis. Once Gill her the news, she contact the Barnard Board of Trustees and requested that Brooks resign. Brooks wrote in protest to Gill’s decision and expressed her wish to show young women that they can marry and succeed in their professional lives. Regardless of Brooks’ protests, Gill stuck to her belief that only single women should make up Barnard’s female faculty. By late 1907, Barnard alumnae started a petition requesting Gill to step down. This discrepancy combined with her inability to see eye-to-eye with President Butler, caused Gill to resign as dean in 1908.

After her time at Barnard, she went on to Boston to set up the first ovational placement bureau for college women. Her time spent as a nurse, as dean of Barnard, and as president of the Association of Collegiate Alumnae exposed her to the struggles women faced when trying to find a job in the workforce.

Following Boston, she moved to Sewanee, Tennessee in 1911 where she worked in employment services for the University of the South for three years. She then became involved with employment services at Trinity College in Durham, North Carolina from 1914 until 1915.

On the onset of World War I, Gill became a special agent in field organization for the U.S Employment Service of the Department of Labor. After the war, she was an educational worker in Kentucky at the Pine Mountain Settlement, a boarding school for elementary and middle school aged children. Her last profession was in Kentucky as a teacher and housemother at Berea College, which was the South’s first non-segregated college and since its founding accepted both men and women. After a life filled with experiences in various parts of the world and various experiences in education, Laura Drake Gill passed away on February 3rd 1926 in Berea Kentucky.

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