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Barnard History

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Millicent McIntosh

As has been discussed in class, Millicent McIntosh was the fourth dean (1947-1952) and the first President (1954-1962) of Barnard. Prior to coming to Barnard, McIntosh earned her B.A. in English and Greek from Bryn Mawr College in 1920, and her Ph.D. in English from John Hopkins University in 1926. She taught at Bryn Mawr from 1926 to 1930, and then she served as dean from 1929-1930. After Bryn Mawr, she went on to be the headmistress of Brearley School from 1930-1947. She took her leadership skills to Barnard in 1947, and truly made her mark. At Barnard, she was personably known as “Mrs. Mac,” which is a testament to how she was revered.

Since she was such an important and popular Dean/President at Barnard, I was wondering if Millie the Dancing Bear, our mascot, was named after Millicent McIntosh. And in fact, my instinct was correct. The Facebook pages states that Millie is named after President McIntosh. This namesake is indicative of how her legacy has remained at Barnard. McIntosh served as a successful president, and one could say a president is a mascot of sorts. With the establishment of a successful and popular president, Barnard was able to claim more authority and notoriety. It could be said that this diminishes her legacy to a mascot, but I think that it’s an important homage. Millie the dancing bear is a symbol of pride and a symbol for the community that Barnard has maintained over the years. The bear was also part of Frederick A. P. Barnard’s family arms, which is yet another connection to an important person in Barnard’s history.

As mentioned before, McIntosh was popular among the student body. She was the prime example of a woman who “had it all,” both a career and a family. Prior to this moment, women chose between a career or a family, but McIntosh was the shining example of being able to maintain both. This veneer of “having it all” reminds me of how the current student body looks at our current President, Deborah Spar.

President McIntosh seems to only have had glowing reviews, but with every public figure, there has to be a dissenting voice. What she did for Barnard is inarguably influential and important, but I am interested in what her critics had to say. In 1963, Betty Freidan’s Feminist Mystique started the conversation about the domestic sphere and how women were being educated in a gendered way. McIntosh became the “ideal” woman that Barnard students wanted to imitate, but Friedan felt that McIntosh encouraged students to believe that they were exceptions to the rule, and shamed them in their refusal to conform. In Friedan’s Sex-Directed Educators, she wrote about McIntosh by saying, “…Guilty personally of being a college president, besides having a large number of children and a successful husband; guilty of also having been an ardent feminist in her time and of having advanced in a good way in her career before she marries… introduced a functional course in marriage and the family, compulsory of all sophomores. The circumstances which led to the college’s decision, two years later, to drop that functional course are shrouded in secrecy...” Friedan spoke about McIntosh indirectly, but all of the jabs line up directly. Friedan criticized McIntosh for providing sex specific courses, which were inherently sexist. In face of the criticism from Friedan, McIntosh spoke up: “Courses have been keyed too universally on a pre-professional basis; professors and administrators have been reluctant to face the kind of lives women will actually be leading when they graduate, marry, and begin to raise a family,”[[1]](#footnote-1) “the kinds of lives women will actually be leading when they graduate, marry, and begin to raise a family.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Although there were courses at Barnard that were gender-specific, there were also courses that prepared women for careers. McIntosh was aware of this dichotomy, but she was realistic about what it meant for the lives of her students. She stated, “So I suggest first that women’s colleges need to drop complacency and to examine their purposes, recognizing the need to prepare women for living as well as for professions.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

McIntosh had a pragmatic point of view, since she was looking at the reality that her students were facing. She felt that it was not only for self-fulfillment/the self that women were pursuing careers, but it was out of necessity. [[4]](#footnote-4) This approach allowed students who, prior to being presented with the option, would have never considered a professional life in addition to their personal life. This allowed for new ambitions among student-body, since they likely did not have aspirations to work prior to their time at Barnard. Although she faced criticism by Friedan, she addressed the criticism head on. For the time period, encouraging women to cultivate professional ambitions was progressive. The fact that she was advocating for attempting to be successful at more than one realm of a woman’s life, to both raise a family and have a career, was almost unheard of. I understand Friedan’s criticism—Barnard’s education was very gendered during the 1950’s. But in light of the times, McIntosh was doing great work. The fact that women were being pushed towards the professional world was truly revolutionary. Although I went into my research looking for dirt on McIntosh, it is hard to tarnish her name.

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1. McIntosh. “Has Education Failed American Women,” 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Friedan, The Feminine Mystique. 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)