

Mary Russell Walker 1846-1938

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Teacher and headmistress

Mary Russell Walker was born on 18 January 1846, the eldest of eight children of William Walker (1813-93) and Margaret Gray (1815-78). William worked for the National Bank of Scotland in Edinburgh in the 1840s and in Glasgow in the 1850s and early 1860s. He moved to Sweden and then to the USA, where he was manager of the Bank of British North America in San Francisco, before returning to Edinburgh around 1874.

This was a time when there was a growing movement for higher education for women. The Edinburgh Ladies Educational Association, renamed the Edinburgh Association for the University Education of Women in 1879, had been founded in 1867, offering university level courses for women, taught by lecturers like Professor David Masson. In 1876 the association employed a tutor, Archibald McGlashan, to teach classes for women who did not have sufficient schooling to take these courses. These classes, based in St George's Hall in Randolph Place, proved a runaway success not only with local students but also students from outside Edinburgh studying by correspondence. In 1877 Mary Walker was appointed Superintendent, Secretary and Treasurer of the "St George's Hall Oral and Correspondence Classes".

In 1882 Mary moved to London first to study and then to teach at the Bishopsgate Training College for teachers. Persuaded to return to Edinburgh in 1885, she set about the establishment of the St George's Training College for Women Teachers, opened in October 1886. The lack of suitable schools willing to allow students access for teaching practice, or offering posts for trained women teachers at secondary level, led two years later to the opening of St George's High School for Girls in Melville Street with Mary as headmistress. The school roll rose quickly from 60 pupils in the first year to c. 190, the most who could be accommodated in Melville Street. Developments elsewhere led to the College and School being amalgamated in 1913 as St George's School for Girls and the following year the school moved to a new purpose-built building at Ravelston where it remains today.

Mary combined the posts of headmistress of the High School and principal of the Training College and continued to teach until she retired in 1910. After retirement she maintained close links with the school until her death in 1938.

