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**Julia Harrington Duff:
An Irish Woman Confronts
the Boston Power Structure,
1900-1905**

Polly Welts Kaufman

In December 1900 Julia Harrington Duff, a mother from Charlestown, a graduate of Boston Normal School and a former teacher in the Boston Public Schools, became the first woman from the Irish Catholic community to be elected to the Boston School Committee. Her election was rather unexpected. Unexpected, that is, by the *Woman's Journal*, the organ of the American Suffrage Association published in Boston. A few days before the election, the *Journal* editors, who earlier warmly endorsed the two other women candidates, noted that the Democrats had nominated a woman and weakly said they "would be glad to see all three of the ladies elected." At first it seemed as if Duff had been unsuccessful after all, but, demonstrating a characteristic toughness, she demanded a recount and won.¹

Julia Duff's election demonstrated how Boston women in the last quarter of the Nineteenth Century were able to extend their roles as teachers and mothers into public participation in school politics. Except for the world of the public school, where their traditional roles gave them both legitimacy and a sense of urgency, political boundaries kept women out of direct participation in state and municipal politics. As women conscious of the need to increase opportunities for girls and of the importance to nurture the next generation, school committeewomen united in opening up Latin School to girls and in supporting the establishment of kindergartens. But as women assigned by society to transmit cultural values to the next generation, they split along ethnic lines when they believed the values of their own group were threatened. Julia Duff's School Committee service revealed how the goal to protect cultural values separated groups of women from each other. As Boston's ethnic communities increasingly influenced

1. *Woman's Journal*, 1 December 1900, p. 381; *Boston Globe*, 12 December 1900, p. 9.

city politics, disparate groups of women were stimulated to use their newly-won power in school politics to define and protect their differing cultural values.

Unlike the fifty years following 1905, women won seats on the Boston School Committee in city-wide elections quite regularly between 1875 and 1905. They generally held from two to four of the twenty-four positions all elected at large. After the committee's size was reduced to five members in 1905, women served singly half of the time and not at all the rest of the time until the 1950's. Massachusetts women won the right to vote for school board members in 1879 after an outcry following the defeat of pioneering Boston committeewoman, Abby May. Despite the efforts of the women's Massachusetts School Suffrage Association, the Boston women's vote reflected liberal Yankee women only, hovering around 1,000, until a school crisis in 1888 caused the women's vote to jump to nearly 20,000, one-quarter of the total vote.

Part of the increase came from Catholic women who for the first time registered to vote in numbers, because they believed their cultural values were in jeopardy. The school crisis had been set off by a backlash to a protest from Catholic Boston School Committee members. Charles Travis, a teacher at English High School, had defined an indulgence as "permission to commit sin . . . sometimes bought with money." When the School Committee censured Travis and dropped the textbook he cited, anti-Catholic organizations, led by the British-American Association and several evangelical Protestant ministers, feared an imminent Catholic takeover of the school system. Protestant women split into two main groups. The evangelical anti-Catholic Independent Women Voters, led by Eliza Trask Hill from Charlestown, broke off from the School Suffrage Association. The remaining moderate women who reflected liberal Brahmin values formed the Citizens' Public School Union to support the censure and try to subdue the crisis.²

Among the new Catholic women voters were many single native-born working women in their early thirties. Although the *Pilot*, the organ of the Boston archdiocese, opposed women voting,

2. See Polly Welts Kaufman, "Boston Women and City School Politics: Nurturers and Protectors in Public Education, 1872-1905," (Ed.D. dissertation, Boston University, 1978), pp. 136-44, 196-231; Lois Bannister Merk, "Boston's Historic Public School Crisis," *New England Quarterly* 31 (June 1958): 172-99.

Donahoe's Magazine took a different stand. "Necessity demands it," they proclaimed. Catholic women needed to vote to "off-set the votes of these rabid women, who hate the Catholics as the 'Devil does Holy Water.'" *Donahoe's* also argued that Catholics should vote so they would not be prevented from becoming teachers in the public schools. The Protestants regained control of the School Committee, but the women's vote never fell back to previous lows, settling down to a range of 6,000 to 10,000 voters.³



Julia Harrington Duff
member of the Boston School Committee, 1901-1905,
photograph provided by the Duff family.

3. *Boston Globe*, 2 October 1888, p. 6; *Boston Pilot*, 29 September 1888, p. 4; *Donahoe's Magazine*, November 1888, p. 423-24.

Julia Duff who was twenty-nine and a single woman teacher at the time undoubtedly voted in 1888. She was born in 1859 and died in 1932.

Thanks to Paul Faler and his students, Mary McDonald and Diane Shephard, for their work in 1988 of finding and analyzing the Boston women's voter registration records for 1888 in two sample Irish Catholic wards: 13 and 16.

By the turn of the century the 1888 school crisis had receded but the twenty-five-year old movement for school reform through the political process among Boston Protestant women was fragmented. Replacing the old leaders was a new group of young women college graduates, the Association of Collegiate Alumnae, who shunned Boston politics. They were convinced that only professional studies of school problems could revitalize the schools. When their investigations of school sanitary conditions in 1895 and 1896 were not heeded, they were affronted and worked to place school governance into the hands of experts. Joining with the conservative Protestant Woman's Education Association, the Collegiate Alumnae called a public meeting to discuss a reorganization of the Boston School Committee. The resulting bill proposed the reduction of the Committee to twelve members, nine to be elected and three to be appointed. When another bill proposing an appointed School Committee was endorsed by Charles William Eliot, president of Harvard, however, pro-suffrage women's groups, including the *Woman's Journal*, protested vigorously the potential loss of their only suffrage. Both bills were defeated, but only for the moment.⁴

The rise of a new organization, the Public School Association, in 1898 coincided with the demise of women's school suffrage groups. Although the PSA proclaimed and probably believed that it was non-partisan and used as its watchword, "Keep the Schools Out of Politics," it was led by Yankee Protestant men. Women's roles were relegated to an auxiliary committee whose main function was to bring out the women's vote. The PSA's slate generally included only a token woman candidate. No more than a few men from the Irish community were included on the PSA's twenty-member governing board and its candidates from the Irish community were generally members of the professional class.⁵

4. Alice Upton Pearmain, "The Boston Schools: a Sanitary Investigation," Municipal Affairs, 2 (September 1898): 497-501; Woman's Education Association Annual Report, 1895, pp. 9-11; 1898, pp. 6-11; 1899, pp. 10-13; Boston Globe, 1897, 9 January, p. 10; 18 February, p. 1; 26 March, pp. 1, 3; 28 February 1898, p. 5; Woman's Journal, 1897: 23 January p. 28; 23 February p. 52; 27 February, p. 68.

5. Public School Association Leaflets, 1900-02; Candidates, 1904; Report of Secretary, 1904, Boston Public Library.

Julia Duff saw the impetus to using the expert and to professionalization not as an answer but as a threat to her right and the rights of Catholic women to participate in public education and to determine its cultural values. The consequence of her concern as it turned to anger was the revelation that underneath the most professional sounding solutions to school problems still hid the desire of the Yankee Protestants to control the Boston Public Schools.



Julia Harrington Duff and her husband, Dr. John Duff.
Photograph provided by the Duff family.

The student body at Boston Normal School, founded by the Boston School Committee to train teachers for the school system, had changed since Julia Duff's own graduation. She had been one of nine young Irish women of fifty-eight to graduate from the Normal School in 1878. She immediately was appointed a teacher in Charlestown where she taught for fourteen years until her marriage to Dr. John Duff. By 1898 a little more than a third of the graduating class of one hundred and one were Irish women, and their proportion was growing. It appeared to Julia Duff, however, that Normal School graduates were no longer assured teaching positions in Boston. She believed that part of the reason

was that the Yankee administration preferred Protestant women as teachers and would go great distances to find them: to Nova Scotia, Vermont, Maine and Western Massachusetts. Duff was determined to protect the young Boston teachers. To secure her goal, she earnestly undertook a two-fold mission: to keep Boston Normal School in the control of the city and to protect the futures of its graduates by assuring them the teaching positions to which she believed they were entitled. She served as president of her Normal School class for fifteen years and was chairman of a committee organized to oppose the transfer of the control of the school from the city to the state.

When her younger brother, Arthur Harrington, a recent Harvard graduate, entered politics by working with Charlestown lawyer and Democratic ward boss, Joseph Corbett, Julia Duff saw her opportunity to carry her campaign to the Boston School Committee as an elected member. It was not long before she would coin her rallying cry, "Boston Schools for Boston Girls."⁶ A life-long resident of Charlestown, long the center of sectarian rivalry, Julia Duff possessed a reservoir of resentment for the Protestant Yankee control of the Boston Schools, schools that had been so much a part of her life. Her father was born in Ireland, but her mother was a fourth-generation American. The Duff and Harrington families believed they had taken their places as contributing members of the broader society and deserved to be accepted. Julia's husband earned his medical degree at Harvard and was a highly-respected doctor. One of her brothers, Louis, was a priest, and another, Walter, a teacher.⁷ When the issue was raised of who would teach in the Boston schools, no arguments representing a need to bring experienced teachers from outside of Boston could begin to satisfy Julia Duff. The issues tapped her store of resentment and aroused her sense of justice.

By 1901, when Julia Duff took her School Committee seat, the inevitable had happened. Young women with Irish last names accounted for more than half of that year's graduating class and

6. Boston Post, 27 November 1900, p. 4, excerpted in Woman's Journal 1 December 1900, p. 381; "How Mrs. Duff Compelled the Machine to Oppose the PSA," Boston Sunday Post, 29 November 1903, p. 16; Boston Public School Documents, 1878, No. 25, p. 54; Boston School Committee Report, 1898, p. 215.

7. Interview with Dr. Paul Duff, son of Julia Duff, 23 February 1976, Peabody, MA.

expected traditional job assurances. Duff was also a parent of three Boston schoolchildren. She did not see the schools as a vehicle to improve society by reforming other people's children, as did many of her predecessors. For Duff the Boston schools represented the place where her own children were being educated, and she wanted to make sure their teachers gave them all the respect she believed the Harringtons and Duffs deserved.⁸

Three Protestant women held seats early in 1901. One of them, Anna Barrows, was a newcomer and another, Dr. Elizabeth Keller, would retire in another year. Only Emily Fifield, who, after nearly twenty years in office, was the grand Protestant lady of the Boston School Committee, remained in power backed by the Public School Association. Although she was twenty years younger, Julia Duff's connection with the Boston Public Schools was virtually life-long, and she was ready to confront the authority of Emily Fifield and the PSA.

On the larger level opposing forces reflecting a similar division continued to build strength. On the surface, the popular business-minded Mayor Patrick Collins, an Irish Democrat, would soon unite Boston, but underneath lay a still suppressed power struggle. The Democratic Irish ward bosses were anxious to run the city without consideration for the Yankee Democrats in the way they believed would best meet the needs of their people in the struggle to earn a living and to gain public respectability. Yankee political leaders from both the Republican and Democratic parties in turn would unite in 1903 to form the Good Government Association. They were certain that non-partisan reform conducted according to the principles of sound administration not only would stabilize the city as it became increasingly divided by ethnic interests, but also would keep the "best men," like themselves and Collins, in control. Paternalism was essentially the Good Government approach, in contrast to self-actualization, the drive that motivated the Irish Bostonians.⁹

8. Boston School Committee Report, 1898, p. 215. For a discussion of why Boston Catholics preferred public education over parochial education, see James W. Sanders, "Boston Catholics and the School Question, 1825-1907," in From Common School to Magnet School, James W. Fraser, Henry L. Allen, and Sam Barnes, editors (Boston: Boston Public Library, 1979): 43-75.

9. See Geoffrey Blodgett, "Yankee Leadership in a Divided City: Boston, 1860-1910," Journal of Urban History 8 (August 1982): 371-396; Geoffrey Blodgett, The Gentle



Emily Fifield, member of the Boston School Committee, 1883-1885 and 1888-1902. Photograph provided by the Unitarian/Universalist Women's Federation.

When Julia Duff and Emily Fifield faced each other as two elected School Committee members, they, on the individual level, represented the same two opposing points of view. Yet, as women, each brought an earnestness to her actions that rose from her personal, intense belief in the moral righteousness of her cause. Each considered herself independent of partisan politics, and, needless to say, above them. Each was the wife of a family

Reformers: Massachusetts Democrats in the Cleveland Era (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1966): 261, 278-83.

doctor, used to deference from residents of one of Boston's communities. The differences between the two women, defined by their individual cultural and religious values, added to the depth of their feelings and made a confrontation almost inevitable.

Although Julia Duff and Emily Fifield both brought long years of experience in the Boston schools to their school committee positions, their perspectives about school affairs were entirely different. As one of the young Irish Catholic women who conscientiously prepared her home lessons year after year under Yankee Protestant women teachers in order to become a Boston teacher herself, Julia Duff was determined to protect the claims of the present young Boston women, particularly the young Irish women, to opportunities for careers in the school system.

Emily Fifield was active in the Unitarian church and had come from the small town of Weymouth, moving to the Dorchester neighborhood of Boston after her marriage. She was accustomed to acting by established principles. The former chair of the school board's Committee on Rules and Regulations and a member of the women's auxiliary to the Civil Service Reform Association, Fifield placed adherence to the rules above her commitment to individuals or goals. Even when there were requests she would like to have supported, such as opening a girls' high school for household arts or raising teachers' salaries, she denied them if she believed the school system could not afford them or if it did not seem the proper time for the change. Her approach was essentially paternalistic; she tended to see people in categories and to determine herself what was best for them. She made a distinction, for example, between the boys enrolled in Boston Latin School and the boys attending the new Mechanic Arts High School. The former would continue to appeal to boys who came from "families where wealth and culture have been an inheritance for generations," while the latter offered "golden opportunities" to the "vast number of equally worthy boys," including a "higher appreciation of the dignity of labor."¹⁰

Duff's first subcommittee assignments put her on two committees with Fifield: textbooks, chaired by Dr. Elizabeth

10. "Emily A. Fifield," Boston Transcript, 13 April 1913, p. 12; 10 September 1896, p. 5; Boston School Documents, 1894, no. 16, pp. 16-17. Emily Fifield (1838-1913) was the first recording secretary of the National Alliance of Unitarian Women serving from 1891 to 1913.

Keller, and manual training, chaired by Fifield. Duff was also assigned to her chosen Normal School committee along with Keller.¹¹ Duff's first public disagreement with Fifield arose when the question of the appointment of Duff's sister-in-law, Ellen L. Duff, to principal of the schools of cookery came before the full board. Fifield asked that Ellen Duff's appointment be reconsidered because it was "inexpedient" to fill the position "at the present time." After Fifield's motion lost, Ellen Duff's appointment was approved by the entire board, except for Fifield and George A.D. Ernst, a PSA leader, who both abstained.

The *Boston Globe* described the debate between Fifield and Duff in full. Noting that Duff made her first speech as a school board member, the *Globe* said she "showed herself to be a very capable debator, the equal of Mrs. Fifield, who is one of the best talkers on the school board." Fifield denied the need for a principal of cooking "while admitting the fitness of the appointee." Duff told of her visits to all the cooking classes and found that all the teachers wanted a "head, to bring system to the classes and encourage cooking in schools where it was neglected. The discussion had "just a tinge of sharpness," the *Globe* noted, "but on the whole it was very good natured." Duff noted that the former principal of cooking had come from England. "Think of it," she remarked, "it being necessary to go out of the country to obtain a teacher of cooking." Fifield's true reason for opposing the appointment was made clear when in reply to a question from Ernst about the proceedings of the subcommittee, she said, "the subject was the exmplification of the spoils system."¹²

The next controversy followed in a month. Elizabeth Keller, chair of the Textbook Committee, recommended that no more copies be purchased of the Franklin Readers, in use for thirty-seven years, or the Warren geographies, in use for forty-six years. In their place, the majority of the committee, including Duff, proposed Supervisor Sarah Arnold's new series, *Stepping Stones to Literature*, as one of two choices as well as three new geographies. Fifield and one other member filed a minority report opposing the new texts and giving limited finances as the main reason. That Fifield's real reason was undoubtedly again her view of "the spoils

11. Boston School Committee Proceedings, 1901, pp. 21, 29-30.

12. Ibid, pp. 112, 123-25; Boston Globe, 10 April 1901, pp. 1-2.

system" was soon evident. Within minutes of the dissenting report, a letter of resignation from Sarah Arnold was read. Duff immediately moved that a special committee be formed to meet with Arnold and was made chair upon its approval.

Duff and Keller worked together to try to convince the entire board to accept their textbook choices and to retain Arnold. Within a month they presented a supporting letter from the Board of Supervisors signed by the superintendent. A few weeks later, Duff announced Sarah Arnold's decision to withdraw her resignation and Keller argued that there was enough money for Arnold's textbooks. The old readers had been in the schools "so long," Keller said, and the teachers "so familiar" with them that "a wrong word would startle them into wakefulness." Duff described "the scramble among publishers to get their books into the schools." The representative for the publisher of the Franklin readers told her that they would "fight to keep the old readers." When she asked, "Don't you care about the children?" he said he "was after the money." Duff ended the debate by triumphantly calling for the yeas and nays on each of the seven votes, all clear majorities, on rejecting the old texts and accepting the new ones, including Arnold's readers. By then Fifield, too, had withdrawn her objection, at least publicly.¹³

The disputes over Ellen Duff's appointment and Sarah Arnold's readers were only the preliminaries for Julia Duff's major confrontation with Emily Fifield early the next year. By then Duff's adversaries had increased both in quantity and quality, a fact that acted more as a spur than a deterrent to her. By backing candidates acceptable to the Democrats, the PSA survived the Democratic sweep in December 1901 that brought Patrick Collins into the mayor's office. Seven of the ten new school board members held PSA endorsement. Among them were James Jackson Storrow and Robert Treat Paine, Jr., both sons of prominent Yankee families. For Storrow, a graduate of Harvard Law School and new to the PSA, his School Committee service would be an eye opener to municipal politics. It would convince

13. Boston School Committee Proceedings, 1901, pp. 176-84, 213-14, 258-62; Boston Globe, 1901, 15 May, p.1; 26 June, p. 6.

him to lead the drive to reform the structure of municipal government, beginning with the School Committee. ¹⁴

Fifield could not have helped but believe the December PSA victory was a vindication of her point of view. When she presided over the dedication of Dorchester High School that month, her pride in Dorchester and the Boston schools was evident in her opening address. She reminded the audience that Dorchester had established "the first free school" and that the new high school would "carry on the work of the fathers" of making "unselfish, honest, upright citizens." Perhaps unconsciously, Fifield set herself apart as she extended a welcome "to those who have lately come to live among us." ¹⁵

Fifield's pride was matched, if not superseded, by that of the Duffs. Julia Duff was escorted to nearly every school board meeting by her husband, Dr. John Duff, conspicuous in his white hat. As the family story goes, Julia's father, who was known as Harrington the hatter, was left with an unsold white hat because none of his customers dared to wear it. Believing that his new son-in-law had "courage enough for anything," Harrington offered it to him. John Duff studied mining engineering at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and practiced it in the West before entering Harvard Medical School. He had been the center on MIT's first football team and the captain of the tug-of-war team. The Duff family's style was influenced by their love for athletics and the theater and their idealization of women. Their sons and grandsons became specialists in sports medicine. The children all studied elocution and one of their sons remembers being taken to the theater to see Sarah Bernhardt. He was given marble busts of Jeanne d'Arc and Dante's Beatrice by his mother. Julia and John Duff enjoyed both the sport and drama of politics and worked as a team. There is no doubt that Julia was earnest in her purpose or that she wrote and read all the lines and selected the issues for

14. Henry Greenleaf Pearson, Son of New England, James Jackson Storrow, 1864-1926 (Boston, 1932): pp. 43-49; PSA Leaflets, 1900; Candidates, 1901.

15. Boston School Committee Report, 1901, pp. 359-405.

contention, but if she ever felt lacking in courage, support was only as far away as the public seating.¹⁸

When the School Committee convened in January 1902, the new PSA majority had no trouble electing PSA member, Republican Grafton Cushing, president. He put PSA members in as chairmen of each subcommittee and dropped Duff from the Textbook Committee, but continued Fifield. At the next meeting Duff demanded the right to tell the board why she was not returned to the Textbook Committee. Cushing told her, she said, that the reason was her "differences with Mrs. Fifield." Stating that she did indeed have such differences, Duff proceeded to outline them in a prepared speech, a copy of which was available for the newspapers.

Duff carefully built her case. First she explained that she refused to vote for books that were "educationally detrimental to the children . . . simply because they were published by certain companies favored by this person." A representative of the American Book Company, she said, "took" her "to task" for opposing the Franklin readers and the Warren geographies. After her surprise at finding he was conversant with the private minutes of the Textbook Committee, Duff found that the minutes were not with the secretary of the School Committee, but at Fifield's home. Then, with obvious relish, Duff revealed newly-found information. If Fifield were "conscientiously honest," Duff said, she would not remain on the Textbook Committee while her daughter held "a high-salaried position in one of the large publishing houses to which the city of Boston was paying thousands of dollars every year."

Emily Fifield made only an oblique response to Duff's charges that night. "All this is very amusing and interesting," she said. "It has certainly served one expedient purpose. It has demonstrated, once and for all, why the Public School Association, the republican and the democratic parties find it is difficult to secure a self-respecting woman for the school committee." In a reply to a question about resigning, Fifield answered, "Why, I

16. Interview with Dr. Paul Duff, 23 February and 1 March 1976; Duff family scrapbook clippings: Boston Traveler, 19 and 22 September 1924; Boston Post, 20 September 1924; Boston Telegraph, 20 September 1924.

haven't thought of such a thing. I haven't been worrying over the matter at all." ¹⁷

Several newspapers said that either Fifield should explain herself or resign. The *Democratic Post* thought the PSA should tell Fifield "as politely as possible, that her usefulness in that position is ended. "If she remained, it would be "embarrassing to that element which looks for reform." After stating that Fifield "may be as honest as any others are, and may intend to act as honestly as any others can," the Republican *Herald* said, "That is not the point." By continuing on the Textbook Committee, she provided "an example which the corrupt may plead when they desire opportunity to promote selfish interests." The *Pilot* commended Duff, saying she had "begun a good work . . . in exposing the grip on the schools of the great school book companies."

Emily Fifield decided not to run for School Committee when her term ended the following December. During the peak of the controversy, Fifield gave as her reason for not replying to Duff's charges: "The people of the city know what I have done and what my work has been." ¹⁸ She did not appreciate the fickleness of the body politic who seemed to forget so quickly her nearly twenty years of devotion to the Boston Public Schools. In the end, however, it was both her complacency and self-righteousness that made her such a perfect target for Julia Duff.

The issue that engaged Duff's most earnest attention was not textbooks but the Normal School. The PSA bloc presented such a solid wall of opposition to her proposals that she decided to take on the whole organization at the polls with a great deal of initial success. The essence of the conflict from Duff's view was opportunity for young women teachers. Teaching offered the best chance for careers for young, educated women. Any person who did not complete the Normal School course could qualify as a teacher in the Grammar schools by passing a special examination

 17. *Boston School Committee Proceedings*, 1902, pp. 4-5, 15-17, 38; *Boston Globe*, 1902: 17 January, p. 14; 29 January, p. 5; *Boston Post*, 1902: 29 January, pp. 1, 10; 30 January, pp. 1, 8; *Boston Transcript*, 30 January 1902, p. 4; *Boston Herald*, 20 January 1902, p. 1.

18. *Boston Post*, 1902: 30 January, p. 4; 31 January, p. 6; *Boston Pilot*, 1902: 8 February, p. 4; 15 February, p. 4. The *Herald* was quoted in the *Pilot*.

if they could present outside teaching experience or a state Normal School diploma. Duff was convinced that Boston girls were losing their chances to become Boston teachers to women graduates of private colleges and raised her cry, "Boston Schools for Boston Girls."¹⁹ PSA members, on the other hand, agreed with Supervisor Stratton Brooks that the schools should attract "the best men and women in the country," and with Superintendent Seaver that a teaching staff recruited from one source "becomes narrow, conceited and unprogressive."²⁰

In order to help Boston women and men who could not afford private colleges to be competitive with new college graduates, Duff asked the School Committee to petition the state legislature for permission to replace the Normal School with a Teachers' College that could grant degrees. Although it was "common custom to criticize young teachers as narrow and limited in experience," Duff stated, it was "unjust to the teachers, unless Boston provides opportunity for broader education." She wanted to keep the two-year elementary course as well, because she believed many Boston girls could afford to study for only two years.²¹

Duff's proposal for a Teachers' College was eventually defeated by the PSA bloc even with support from the supervisors and superintendent who admired the model of New York's Teachers' College. In her final argument, Duff noted, "It is only the children of the wealthy who can afford to attend the universities." She demanded that the city "provide similar instruction for others as well." The students in the proposed Teachers' College would not miss the advantages of a university, she said, because "Boston is itself a university." Citing Boston's many cultural institutions, Duff proclaimed that the Teachers' College should become "the keystone of this great university." The

19. The PSA campaign leaflets of 1900 and 1901 indicate that the successful PSA candidates included five bankers and four lawyers. Professor Frank Vogel and Mark Mulvey, a Catholic and a labor representative, eventually sided with Duff. For the importance of teaching as a career for second-generation Irish women, see Hasia Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), pp. 96-99.

20. *Boston School Committee Proceedings*, 1903, pp. 117, 266.

21. *Ibid.*, 1901, pp. 422, 453-56, 459-61; *Boston Globe*, 30 November 1901, p. 7.

public school parent "who pays only a poll-tax" is "of far greater benefit to the city" than the man who only pays taxes on his city property, Duff declared. "The history of education in Massachusetts," she said, revealed that "the whole warfare against the extension of Public School education" had been waged by such taxpayers:

from the time of the District School, meant for the plebian, and the Academy for the aristocrat, clear through the establishment of Grammar Schools for boys, the admission of girls to the same; the establishment of a High School [for girls] and its abolishment a year later, its re-establishment later still; the establishment of a Girls' Latin School, and finally the opening of collegiate courses to women.²²

The combination of her frustration with PSA opposition to her proposal for a public Teachers' College and the positive reaction to her stand on textbooks gave Duff both the courage and confidence to carry her fight against the PSA into the Democratic City Committee in the 1902 December election. When the City Committee persisted in its acceptance of PSA endorsement of three of the regular candidates, Duff organized an independent party called the Democratic Citizens. The *Post* reported that sixty people from all over the city met at the Duffs' home to pick up nomination papers and plan the campaign. For every PSA candidate endorsed by the Democrats, the Democratic Citizens placed one of its own candidates in the field. They were willing

22. Boston School Committee Proceedings, 1902, pp. 16, 31-36, 115-26; Boston Globe, 17 January 1902, p. 14. Boston Normal School became Boston Teachers' College in 1922, but it still belonged to the city until 1952, when it became part of the state college system. Until the opening of the University of Massachusetts in Boston in 1965, Boston State College, as it came to be called, served as the only "People's University" in the City of Boston. In 1982, it was merged with the University of Massachusetts in Boston in 1965, Boston State College, as it came to be called, served as the only "People's University" in the City of Boston. In 1982, it was merged with the University of Massachusetts in Boston. For an overview of the opposition to providing public higher education in Massachusetts throughout the state, see Robert T. Brown, The Rise and Fall of the People's Colleges: The Westfield Normal School, 1839-1914; (Westfield: Institute for Massachusetts Studies, 1988).

to support only Democratic candidates who were *not* endorsed by the PSA.

Duff surprised not only the PSA but the Democratic City Committee with the success of her organization. Except for School Committee President Grafton Cushing, who came in last, the only PSA candidates elected were the three with Democratic endorsement. The three candidates with only Democratic Citizen endorsement not only won but they polled an average of 20,000 votes each, two-thirds of the total received by candidates with both Democratic and Democratic Citizen endorsement.²³

Part of the reason for Duff's success was that she got out the Catholic women's vote. The *Woman's Journal* reported that Duff's movement for registering Democratic women was so successful that she "astounded Democratic leaders." The total increase in the registration of women was 3,000. Although Charlestown showed the highest rise at 250 percent, Duff's campaign brought increased women's registration in Democratic wards in South Boston and other parts of the city.²⁴

The election of 1902 brought to the School Committee a second Democratic woman who became an ally of Julia Duff. Mary A. Dierkes was a proud young woman from the German Catholic community chosen, according to the *Post*, in "recognition of the German voters." Like Duff, Mary Dierkes was born in Boston. Closely associated with the German community centered at Holy Trinity Church in the South End, her family also expected to be fully accepted by the broader society. Mary's father, Auguste, who owned and ran the Hotel Dierkes, known for its restaurant, was described as a "well-known German gentleman." As a young woman, she was given unusual advantages. After she graduated from the Franklin Grammar School, she studied music with William Whitney in Boston before traveling and studying in Europe for seven years. She graduated from the Conservatory at

23. *Boston Post*, 21 November, pp. 5-6; 11 December 1902, p.1; *Boston Globe*, 11 December 1902, p.1.

24. *Boston Municipal Register*, 1903, pp. 291-293; *Woman's Journal*, 1902: 22 November, p. 372; 29 November, p. 380.

Although he leaves out the role of Julia Duff in encouraging Boston Catholic women to vote, the following article sets the question of Catholic attitudes towards woman suffrage in perspective: James J. Kenneally, "Catholicism and Woman Suffrage in Massachusetts," *Catholic Historical Review* 53 (April 1967): 43-57.

Leipsig, Germany, where she prepared to become an opera singer. She returned to Boston around 1895 upon the final sickness of her father. After the death of her mother in 1900, Mary was left in charge of the family affairs, including a younger brother.²⁵



Mary Dierkes, member of the Boston School Committee, 1903-1905. Photograph provided by the Boston Herald Morgue, George H. Beebe Communication Reference Library, Boston University College of Communication.

It was unusual enough for a Catholic woman to run for public office, or even vote, but it was even more so in the German community. An article published not long after her service on the School Committee in the Holy Trinity parish newspaper, the *Monatsbote*, opposed woman suffrage, saying, "The dignity and character of woman would be degraded . . . if she engaged in the turmoil of our corrupted politics." Yet, when Mary Dierkes decided to run for School Committee, the

 25. *Boston Post*, 21 November 1902, p. 6; *Boston School Documents*, 1886, p. 209; "Dierkes" file, the Morgue, Boston University School of Public Communications; *Woman's Journal*, 13 December 1902, p. 393; *Boston City Directory*, 1880, 1885, 1896-1916. Until 1914, Mary Dierkes's entry was "vocalist." Telephone interviews with Mrs. Joseph Reiss, Dedham, MA, 10 May 1976 and Martha C. Engler, Dorchester, MA, 25 May 1976. Dierkes was born in 1871 and died in 1950.

Monatsbote was proud of her candidacy. Mary Dierkes had such special standing in her community that even though women were not expected to exercise their school suffrage, the men of her parish were urged to vote for her. She was described as "in education and ability at least the quality of the other. . . women candidates," and, "beyond this," the editors proudly stated, "she is also a German." Upon her election the *Monatsbote* said that her success had "given more satisfaction to no one other than the men and young men of the parish, who so firmly and untiringly supported their candidate" and who saw it as "a sort of family affair."

The question of why Dierkes chose to run for School Committee can perhaps be answered by where she lived after she returned from Europe. By then the family had moved from the South End to a large house in the small Harrison Square community in Dorchester where Emily Fifield had lived since her marriage. Considering that Dierkes was elected directly after Fifield's retirement, it can be conjectured that she ran for office out of competition with a Yankee woman. Julia Duff must have given her the Democratic Citizen endorsement with particular enthusiasm.²⁶

Soon after Dierkes took her seat and despite PSA opposition, Duff convinced the School Committee to allow Boston male college graduates to take the one-year normal school course provided to qualify women college graduates to teach in the grammar schools. During the same period the first Catholic superintendent, George Conley, was chosen after being opposed by the PSA bloc. Of the first sixteen Boston men entering the post-graduate year, nine were graduates of the Catholic colleges Holy Cross and Boston College and four others had Irish last names.²⁷

26. *Monatsbote*, 7 (November 1906): 9 (January 1908): 11; 10 (January 1909): 21. Translation by Martha Engler and Fr. Burckhart of the *Monatsbote* (Messenger) at the Holy Trinity Church, Shawmut Avenue, Boston.

Mary Dierkes received the highest vote of any candidate in Ward 9. Boston Municipal Register, 1903, p. 291.

27. Ernst tried to get a legal ruling against Duff's plan but it eventually passed and in April 1904 the state legislature granted permission. Boston School Documents, 1905, No. 10, pp. 25-28; Boston Pilot, 23 July 1904, p. 4. By 1905 there were still only five masters with Irish last names, representing 7 percent of the masters. Manual of the Public Schools of the City of Boston, 1905. Another reason for the

Julia Duff herself was up for reelection in December 1903. She warned the Democratic City Committee that she would set up her own organization again if they endorsed PSA candidates. According to the *Post* Charlestown's ward boss Joseph Corbett urged the City Committee to ignore her, arguing that the PSA would support Mayor Collins' bid for reelection in return for Democratic sponsorship of PSA candidates. Ward bosses Jim Donovan and John Keliher, however, decided to go along with Duff. Although the *Post* said that there were "none who openly champion her cause, her powerful personality dominated the entire proceedings." Duff maintained that it was not she, but "the principle" that won.

Duff stumped the city making over one thousand speeches largely to women. Her appeal was to "mothers, sisters, and daughters, and through them, reach the fathers, brothers, and sons." She was careful to preserve her womanly image: illustrated articles in the *Post* and the *Globe* described her home life in traditional and elegant terms. The women's vote rose to a high of nearly 14,000. Duff topped the entire ticket and no new PSA members were elected. At last she became chairman of the Normal School Committee.²⁸ It was now Julia Duff who was riding high, a dangerous place for any political figure in an era of high shifting political fortunes, particularly so for a woman with a mind of her own.

When Julia Duff, with the help of her ally Mary Dierkes, decided to oppose James Jackson Storrow's special project, the educational centers, she met her match. During his School

 opposition to allowing male college graduates to enter the Normal School might be a conflict with a plan to build up the Harvard School of Education. In a study by Dean Paul Hanus in 1904-05, he found that Harvard education graduates lagged behind Columbia graduates in attaining school positions. Five of the first men at the Normal School were Harvard graduates. In 1906, Storrow, who was then chairman of the Harvard Board of Overseers, paid for a pamphlet written by Hanus to encourage the development of the Harvard School of Education. When Julia Duff listed the opponents to the Teachers' College in 1902, she quoted a Harvard professor as saying, "The full advantages of the educational courses at Harvard have never been tested." Boston School Committee Proceedings, 1903, p. 120; Pearson, Son of New England, pp. 49-50; Paul H. Hanus, Comparison for the Provision of the Study of Education...at Harvard University(Cambridge, 1906).

28. Boston Post, 1903: 20 November, p. 16; 29 November, p. 16; Boston Globe, 22 November 1903, p. 44; Municipal Register, 1904, pp. 277-79; Boston School Committee Proceedings, 1904, p. 30.

Committee term, Storrow developed five evening centers in school buildings. They attracted 2,500 people for courses in dressmaking, bookkeeping, carpentry, and music, besides providing gymnasiums and reading rooms.²⁹

Apparently believing that the centers were being "boomed" to build Storrow's reputation at the expense of the fourteen regular evening schools teaching academic subjects, Duff and Dierkes decided to oppose them. Dierkes tried to have the Centers "abolished," stating that the school board had authority to maintain only evening schools. Duff and Dierkes were two of a minority of four who, in one meeting, refused to vote for three orders to do with the Centers. Despite his "careful and calm . . . rejoinders," Storrow refused to run for reelection in December 1904. Instead he began a campaign to bring professional administration to the schools by centralizing the power in a small, appointed board.³⁰

A subject of bitter disagreement between the PSA and Duff and many regular Democrats was the power of school board's nine division committees. PSA's George Ernst believed that their control over faculty appointments encouraged "secret influence," even though all candidates had to pass the supervisors' examinations first. In 1902 he succeeded in leading the PSA majority to return the power of appointments to the superintendent subject only to the approval of the entire school board. But, in 1904, with the support of both women, the Democratic majority returned the power of first approval to the division committees. Ernst, taking the perspective of central business interests, saw the return of power to the area committees as reverting to "the old local, provincial spirit." Duff, with her feet firmly in the community, supported decentralization. One of her early proposals was to increase the supervisors to nine and

29. Boston School Documents, 1903, No. 9.

30. Pearson, Son of New England, pp. 44-50; Boston School Committee Proceedings, 1904, pp.130, 145-46, 176, 184, 401-02, 429-31.

With a touch of irony, Dierkes tried twice alone and twice with Duff's help to require pupils taking "Indian Bead Work and Basketry" in the Centers to pay for their own materials.

place them in divisions as superintendents so they would be "more closely in touch" with parents, teachers, and schools.³¹

Julia Duff's strong belief in keeping the power of school governance in the community was in direct opposition to the Good Government forces who would soon muster all their strength to centralize control of the school system in 1905 and, four years later, reform city government. Her independence also put her in conflict with the Irish ward bosses who became engaged in a power struggle among themselves upon the death of Mayor Collins near the end of his term in 1905. Neither group would have tolerated Julia Duff much longer. She had succeeded in dramatizing the gulf between those very groups, the confident Yankee businessman, so anxious to professionalize city government, and the second-generation Irish politician, so eager to guide his own destiny.

Julia Duff lost her power even more swiftly and dramatically than anyone would have expected. In September 1904 her brother, Walter Harrington, became master of the Washington School in the West End, a predominantly Jewish community devoted to its evening center. In the fall of 1905, Robert Silverman, a member of the West End community, brought charges against Harrington, supported by one hundred and forty signatures, and demanded his dismissal. At first the division committee voted to exonerate him, but after a special committee reported the results of further hearings, the entire school board voted to remove Harrington from his position in December 1905. It is not certain what the charges were, although the newspapers mentioned padding payrolls by certifying absent teachers as present and taking the difference, passing bad checks, and smoking in front of pupils. Pleading for her brother in a speech that lasted more than two hours, Julia Duff asked that Harrington be suspended without pay "until such time as the present condition of the public subsides." She placed the blame on her position declaring that her brother was being sacrificed for her, saying dramatically, "I am the prisoner. I have been condemned in the

 31. Boston School Committee Proceedings, 1902, p. 500; 1904, pp. 140-44, 172-73, 290, 302; George A. O. Ernst, "The Movement for School Reform in Boston," Educational Review 28 (December 1904): 433-43. Julia Duff's plan for decentralization was implemented in Boston (and New York) in the 1960s.

person of my brother." It was to be her last school board meeting.
32

Meanwhile Storrow's drive to bring order to school politics by changing the Boston School Committee to a small appointed board progressed. His petition to the legislature carried more than one hundred names, including those of four former mayors. After several contentious hearings, the legislature reduced the Boston School Committee from twenty-four to five members elected at large in April 1905. Although the reduction would have the effect of blocking women's opportunity for direct participation in school politics, women suffragists viewed the final vote with relief. The issue on which they were forced to focus their energies was the question of an appointed or elected board. The *Woman's Journal* kept its readers aware of the threat to Boston women's only suffrage. They had heard "asserted publicly and without contradiction" that a major purpose of the bill was "to exclude the women of Boston from all voice in choosing the Boston school board." Julia Duff led the opposition for the Democratic women. Storrow's bill "originated in pique and disappointed ambition," she declared. If the "book concerns were able to control nine members of the present school board," she contented, they would "own a board of five." 33 Duff ran for reelection in November under the new rules. She revived the Democratic Citizens party and ran on nomination papers. Although she was defeated, her nearly 34,000 votes constituted a respectable showing. 34

32. Boston School Committee Proceedings, 1905, pp. 337-38, 380-81, 445-47; Boston Advocate, 29 September 1905, pp. 1-2; Boston Globe, 1905: 25 October, pp. 1, 9; 17 December, p. 1; "Knows Schools from A to Z," Practical Politics, 7 February 1905.

33. Boston Transcript, 8 March 1905, p. 2; Boston Globe, 1905; 7 March, p. 1; 8 March, p. 1; Boston Post, 29 April 1905, p. 5; Woman's Journal, 1905: 7 January, p. 1; 4 March, p. 33; 11 March, p. 37; 18 March, p. 41; Massachusetts Acts, 1905, Ch. 350; Shall the Boston School Committee be Reorganized? (Boston, February-March, 1905). No Women's names appear on Storrow's petition. The best discussion of how lay people and teachers lost their influence in governing public schools in this period is David Tyack, The One Best System (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974).

34. Boston Globe, 13 December 1905, p. 1; Boston Municipal Register, 1906, p. 292.

Julia Duff and Mary Dierkes were the only Catholic women to hold seats on the Boston School Committee until 1950. Between 1905 and 1950 three women served singly for a total of twenty-one years, and no women at all during twenty-three years. Yet from 1875 to 1905, the terms of fourteen women added up to seventy-seven years. Besides the obvious answer of the reduction in the size of the Boston School Committee, why did the participation of women in school politics decline? ³⁵

From the point of view of Democratic and Republican men, women had proved to be a disruptive force in Boston Politics. In their earnestness to improve the life chances of Boston children, they voted for costly new programs. In their desire to preserve cultural values, they brought Boston's cultural conflicts to the surface and called for a continuation of community control. Their vote in school elections rose and fell according to how deeply they cared about the issues. In their impatience with men whose ambitions they believed took precedence over the needs of the schools, committeewomen hindered personal careers and programs of individual men and groups of men.

Still, Julia Duff's refusal to accommodate to Yankee political leaders and goals foreshadowed imminent actions of other Boston-born members of the Irish community. In 1905 after the sudden death of Patrick Collins, John Fitzgerald became the first Democratic ward boss to be elected mayor. In 1909 although the Good Government's proposed city charter passed and James Jackson Storrow became a candidate for the first four-year mayoralty, it was all over for the "expert." Fitzgerald won the election, followed by James Michael Curley and the Irish Democrats' control of Boston city government was virtually complete. ³⁶

35. The Black community also lost its representation on the School Committee when it was reduced in size. Dr. Samuel Courtney, who served from 1897 to 1900, was the last Black School Committee member until John O'Bryant took his seat in January, 1978. In 1983 Boston increased the size of the School Committee in order to allow a broader representation to four members at large and nine from individual districts. Boston Mayor Raymond Flynn is currently proposing a city referendum on whether or not to change the present Boston School Committee to an appointed board.

36. See Blodgett, "Yankee Leadership in a Divided City," pp. 390-93.

When the reduction in the size of the Boston School Committee made its positions politically desirable, there was no longer room for more than an occasional token woman. For more than twenty-five years, however, women's traditional roles had been extended to include elected positions on the School Committee. The participation of women in Boston school politics would lie dormant for more than fifty years until another school crisis created by cultural conflicts--this time beginning with the demands of the Black community for a role in determining the cultural values of the schools--would again galvanize women into assuming public roles. Once again the expansion of women's traditional roles into school politics would become acceptable to society.³⁷

37. For a discussion of the way traditional definitions of women's roles reflect issues of power, see Linda Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: the rhetoric of Women's History," Journal of American History 75 (June 1988): 9-39.