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# **A Practice of Her Own: Female Career Success beyond the Accounting Firm**

## **Abstract**

This paper attempts to address the neglect of women practitioners in accounting history by examining the career of one of Scotland's first female chartered accountants, Helen Lowe. Rather than remaining within her training firm, Helen established her own accounting practice in 1928 which she ran for almost seventy years. In her firm's accounting ledgers and correspondence, a rare archive is available which captures the often absent voice of the female accountant practitioner. Helen's story illustrates the individual experience within the broader sweeping history of the early twentieth century gender struggle in the accounting profession. It also suggests how female gender, often viewed as a negative characteristic to achieving career success within the discriminatory environment of the accounting firm, may act as a positive attribute in business more generally.

## **Keywords**

Female career success; gender and accounting; Helen Lowe; women accountants.

## **1. Introduction**

This paper recounts the career history of Helen Lowe, chartered accountant. Born in 1897, Helen was one of the first women to qualify as an accountant in Edinburgh, but perhaps the most interesting aspect of her career was that in 1928, at the age of thirty, Helen chose the unusual route of setting up her own accountancy practice rather than remaining within the accounting firm in which she had trained. She ran her business for almost seventy years, until her death a few weeks shy of her

one hundredth birthday. In providing this account, the paper seeks to help fill a vacuum within the literature, for while the story of women's fight for membership of the accounting profession has been comprehensively documented in Kirkham and Loft's (1993) seminal work, the issues of women and gender, similar to other marginalised groups, have been relatively absent from historical accounting research (Hammond, 2003).

Of course, one rationale for this neglect may be the sheer lack of archive material relating to women in accounting and business. In particular, the gender bias that has been present within the accounting profession from the outset may have resulted in silencing the oral and written word of women accountants. However, the case of Helen Lowe, chartered accountant, provides the researcher with a rather rare opportunity to help redress past neglect. Unlike other early female accounting pioneers, whose voices may have been lost within the gendered institution that constitutes the accounting firm, Helen's voice is captured in the letter correspondence surrounding the set up and early years of her own accountancy practice. In addition, her firm's accounting records, comprising her cashbook and nominal ledgers, provide a fascinating insight into the trials and tribulations associated with running a practice as a single woman in the 1930s. Consequently, this paper attempts to supplement the literature on gender and accounting, particularly Shackleton's (1999) insightful study of the Scottish profession, by releasing the female voice of a constituent member of this broader historiography. By providing an interpretational biography (Virtanen, 2009) of the career of a Scottish female accountant, the paper seeks to illustrate the individual woman's experience within the broader sweeping history of the early twentieth century gender struggle in the accounting profession

A further objective of this paper is to consider how the experience's of Helen Lowe affects our understanding of the issue of women's career success within the accounting profession and business more generally. In addition to the history of women's struggle to gain admittance to the profession, the topic of women's lack of promotion prospects within accounting, particularly promotion to partner level within an accounting firm, is the most commonly researched theme within the literature on gender and accounting. The issue of women's career success extends beyond the time frame of the early decades of the twentieth century to encompass not only the challenges of women who battled for legal admission into the profession but also those of contemporary female accountants. The case of Helen Lowe, a female pioneer who chose to establish her own accounting practice rather than remain employed within her training firm, provides the opportunity to document the career success of women beyond the confines of the firm. There is a dearth of material on women accountants' progress within organisations other than their training firms. The success of Helen Lowe's business, both in terms of financial rewards and longevity, facilitates a richer understanding of the issue of women's career success in accounting and business more generally. As the reader will discover, Helen's gender appears to have been a benefit rather than a shortcoming when running her own practice. Consequently, although it may be only an isolated case, the career history of Helen Lowe suggests that women have and can overcome the gender discrimination inherent in accounting firms, and indeed turn gender to their advantage, by setting up their own practices.

The paper is structured as follows. In order to understand the social and historical context of Helen Lowe's career, the literature on the struggle of women,

more generally, to gain entry to the British accounting profession during the early decades of the twentieth century is first reviewed. This section encompasses the response of the various professional accounting bodies to the issue of female admittance, the impact of the Great War on the profession, and how campaigning by the suffragette movement and political pressures ultimately culminated in legislative reform. The following section turns from the history of women's entry into the profession to consider their chances of career success once they have been admitted. A review of the existing literature suggests that women encounter a lack of promotion prospects if they choose to remain within an accounting firm. Little is known however, of the career success of women accountants who deviate from this route by for example, taking up a position within an organisation other than an accounting firm, or by setting up their own accounting practice.

The next section introduces the paper's primary research, the case of Helen Lowe, a female accounting pioneer who took the less travelled road of establishing her own accountancy practice. Drawing on archival records and interviews, this section recounts Helen's trials in gaining entry to the profession during the 1910s, her experiences within her training firm during the 1920s, her decision to leave it, and the challenges she faced in setting up her own practice as a single woman in 1928. An examination of the records of the early years of her practice (1930s) reveals the innovative ways in which Helen diversified her range of services in order to boost firm income. In particular, it suggests how she turned the gender discrimination, to which she and female members of her profession more generally were exposed, to her advantage in her practice. This section also attempts to provide some insight into the personal character of the woman and her devotion to charitable concerns and

women's causes in her personal life. The final section discusses the case of Helen Lowe within the context of the broader gender literature in accounting; Helen's early career echoes the struggles which women of this era generally encountered in gaining admission to the profession. However, the subsequent success of her business career prompts a consideration of our understanding of the career success of women accountants. It supplements the existing argument that the lack of promotional prospects for women within the profession is a product of the discriminatory practices of the accounting firm and raises the possibility of women turning such practices to an advantage by pursuing career success beyond the confines of the firm.

## **2. The gender struggle within the British accounting profession**

The story of women's struggle to gain entry into the British accounting profession is set within the context of the demand for employment rights by nineteenth century women more generally (Rosen, 1974). Since the latter years of the nineteenth century, improvements within the educational system had facilitated female education and consequently expanded the career possibilities for women. In state schooling, the passing of the Education Act of 1870 ensured that girls had access to a basic elementary education (Hollis, 1979). Expanding opportunities also arose within third level education. For example, Scottish universities began to admit female students from the early 1890s following the passing of the Universities (Scotland) Act 1889 (Hamilton, 1983, p.103). One role identified as suitable employment for women was that of clerk. The nature of clerical tasks and the work environment associated with them were perceived by the Society for the Promotion of Employment of Women, as suitable to women (Zimmeck, 1984). Burgeoning overseas trade and government services during the Edwardian era had brought about an increased

demand for clerical work in both private and public bodies (Buckley, 1979; Crossick, 1977). Women flocked to these newly created positions; the UK census records a jump in the percentage of women clerks from 1.1% in 1871 to 18.2% in 1911, and a further increase to 43.1% by 1931 (Kirkham and Loft, 1993, p.520 and p.545). Whether this rising trend was useful for promoting women's employment status is however questionable. As clerical work began to be transformed into women's work it consequently became downgraded in terms of pay and promotion prospects (John, 1986). The increasing number of females entering the clerical classes also served to reduce its status as an occupational category (Cohen, 1986; Kwollek-Folland, 1994).

Meanwhile the accounting profession remained determinedly aloof from the issue of broadening gender participation. They had successfully differentiated their body of expertise from that of clerical work, and by consequence from the latter's increasingly female constituency (Loft, 1992; Cooper and Taylor, 2000). From their inception in the nineteenth century, the various British accountancy bodies (comprising the Institute of Chartered Accountants of England and Wales (ICAEW), the Society of Incorporated Accountants and Auditors (SIAA), the Society of Accountants in Edinburgh, the Institute of Accountants and Actuaries in Glasgow, and the Society of Accountants in Aberdeen) had replicated the practices of their established competitors in law and medicine by adopting an exclusively male membership (Kirkham and Loft, 1993). The masters of double entry followed a ruthlessly single-entry regime (Lehman, 1992). Such masculine gendering was an essential ingredient of status building. In addition, given that articulated clerks had to pay a fee for their apprenticeships, recruitment below the middle class was severely limited (Matthews, 2006).

One accountancy body however stood apart from the rest of its profession. The London Association of Accountants (LAA) decided to admit its first female member, an Ethel Purdie, in 1909 (Lehman, 1992, p.268). The LAA was a relatively new entry on the professional accounting scene. Founded in 1904 (ACCA, 2004), it was a young body when compared to the ICAEW, which was formed in 1880 (Kirham and Loft, 1993, p.529), or the Scottish bodies, the Society of Accountants in Edinburgh and the Institute of Accountants and Actuaries in Glasgow, which were founded in 1853 (Shackleton, 1999, p.138). In addition to its youth, the status of the LAA was not as high as its more established competitors due to the fact that it did not require its members to undertake expensive articles of clerkship, instead admission to membership was based on completion of five years of practical training (ACCA, 2004).

It was a further nine years before another professional body chose to follow the path of the LAA. This may have been due in no small measure to the successful culmination of the women's suffrage movement; in February 1918, the Representation of the People Act became law and expanded the electoral franchise to encompass women over the age of thirty (Bush, 2000, p.197). Perhaps recognising a sway in public opinion, or perhaps more significantly a political determination to provide women with equal access to entry, the SIAA (the Society of Incorporated Accountants and Auditors) moved to admit women to membership in 1918 (Kirkham and Loft, 1993, p.540). Then in October 1919 the Sex Discrimination (Removal) Bill, which abolished all remaining restrictions on the entry of women into the professions, was approved by the House of Commons making any further deliberations irrelevant (Pugh, 2000, p.108). At this point, the Scottish professional bodies and the ICAEW,



the remaining prominent bodies to have held off making any changes to its rules regarding female membership, were legally obliged to abandon their male only policy (Kirkham and Loft, 1993, p.541).

However, although women were now legally empowered to join the profession, further challenges lay in their path. The demobilization of the armed forces in the wake of the Great War had significant repercussions for female employment in both clerical and accounting work (Davidoff & Westover, 1986; Lehman, 1992). If women did not lose their positions altogether, they were downgraded to more low-level tasks (Higonnet et al, 1987). Those who sought to retain their positions were branded as selfish, unwomanly and unpatriotic (Zimmeck, 1984). Within the accounting profession, returning service-men were granted more favourable conditions than any of the new female recruits. As Kirkham and Loft (1993, p.544) aptly remark “women workers were being demobilized along with the men soldiers”. Overall then, the freedom of entry of women into the accounting bodies had little impact on the accounting profession as a whole. In the period 1920-1929, only forty women were admitted as articled clerks to Scottish accounting firms, and most of these came from privileged backgrounds (Shackleton, 1999, p.150). The 1931 UK Census records 119 women accountants versus 13,825 men (Kirkham and Loft, 1993, p.547). Even the London Association of Accountants, one of the first bodies to allow women entry, had only 56 female members out of a total membership base of 2875 by 1930 (ACCA, 2004, p.71). Consequently, despite some favourable legislative reform, career opportunities for women generally at the start of the 1920s were limited in practice. The momentum of the suffrage struggle, and its successes,

was to some extent stalled by a “cult of domesticity” (Pugh, 2000, p.209). This revival of a domestic ideology successfully herded women back to the homestead.

### **3. Gender and career success in the accounting profession**

As the remaining paragraphs of the last section might indicate, winning legal entry into the accounting profession accounts for only one half of the story of women’s struggle within a male dominated regime. Achieving career success once admitted as a member to the profession was a further hurdle facing the female accountant (Cooper, 2008). The adverse affect of female gender on career success within the *accounting firm* has been indicated by numerous scholars across time and space. In a US study of accounting firms by Anderson et al (1994), gender is seen as a significant factor in determining career success, with female accountants, particularly those married with children, as being least likely to achieve upward mobility. Success on the accounting corporate ladder is achieved by adopting masculine stereotypical behaviour suggest Maupin and Lehman (1994). In fact, Dwyer and Roberts (2004) argue that the ‘ideal worker’ within US public accounting is a masculine one. On the other side of the Atlantic, Ciancanelli et al (1990) have illustrated that despite the growing number of women joining the UK accountancy profession, women are still under-represented within accounting firms at the high ranking level of partner. Dambrin and Lambert (2008) report a similar tale with regard to the scarcity of female partners within French audit firms. The scenario is no different in the southern hemisphere. Emery et al’s (2002) rich study of female members of the New Zealand Society of Accountants during the 1940/50s revealed not one incident of promotion to partnership, while Windsor and Auyeung’s (2006) exploration of accounting firms in Australia and Singapore indicates that gender, once again, adversely affects career

progression. The addition of factors such as race and motherhood into the mix can create further complications for career advancement. For example, Kim's (2004) insightful study of the experiences of Chinese women accountants in New Zealand introduces the extra hurdle facing ethnic minority women within the accounting firm, while Haynes' (2008) rich exploration of the challenges of pregnancy and motherhood for a female accountant within a professional firm once again reveals a gender bias.

The remarkable consistency of the results of these studies, conducted at different times and places across the globe, seems to indicate that gender discrimination is a common phenomenon within accounting firms. From a UK perspective at least, Anderson-Gough et al (2005) suggest that gendering is embedded with accounting firms, gender discrimination has entered the fabric of these organisations and is reproduced through a process of socialization. Such socialization may be further reinforced by country specific cultural factors. For example, Carrera et al's (2001) study of gender practices within Spanish accounting firms during the period (1942-1988) revealed the influence of broader factors beyond the confines of the firm such as the country's military dictatorship and allegiance to the Catholic Church. Similarly, Komori's (2008) examination of the experiences of Japanese women accountants recognises the unique impact of Japan's cultural context on gender issues within the accounting firm.

The above research seems to suggest that almost a century on from gaining the right to become members of the accounting profession, women are still failing to achieve career success within it. However, this pattern, or at least our knowledge of it,

appears to be restricted to the domain of the professional accounting firms. Little is known of women accountants' career success, or otherwise, in accounting and business more generally. As Parker (2008) points out, such has been the research preoccupation with gender issues in relation to the professional accounting firm, that there has been a neglect of women accountants' roles within other organisations. To this neglect, this author would add the lack of research into the success or otherwise of women who have established their own business. After all, in the light of discrimination from within professional practice, setting up a business of one's own seems a reasonable step (Windson and Auyeung, 2006). There is a dearth of material on early female accounting pioneers who took this route rather than remaining within their training firm. A review of the literature revealed only two cases, and in both cases these women were mentioned more in passing rather than occupying the central theme of the respective studies. Wescott and Seiler's (1986) broad review of women in the accounting profession mentions the case of Catherine Ross, the first female Certified Public Accountant who qualified in 1899, and who ran her own practice in New York well into the twentieth century. Equally Kirkham and Loft's (1993) seminal study of gender and the British accountancy profession refers to the case of Ethel Purdie, the first female member of the London Association of Accountants who made history, not only by becoming the first female professional accountant in the UK, but who also countered the profession's discriminatory exclusion practices by setting up her own London firm in 1907. This paper seeks to supplement the sparse field on the history of early female accounting practitioners by highlighting the career of Helen Lowe chartered accountant, who in 1920s Scotland established her own business which she ran for the next seventy years.

#### **4. The career of Helen Lowe, Chartered Accountant**

Before recounting the career of Helen Lowe, it is pertinent to first outline some methodological details. The researcher's primary material on the case is drawn from three main sources. First, the accounting ledgers relating to Helen Lowe's accounting practice from the date of its inception (1928) to the date of her death (1997) are held by the accounting firm which still bears her name. Second, a collection of business correspondence, which includes the occasional personal letter, covering the business' start up period (1928-1931) was in the private possession of a relative of Helen Lowe's (Sheila McLeish)<sup>1</sup>. This latter material was particularly useful in providing colour and commentary on the facts and figures found within the firm's accounting ledgers. Finally, the researcher drew on interviews with both Sheila McLeish and the current partner in the Helen Lowe accountancy practice, John Curister, in order to gain some insight into the personal character of the woman. A small amount of secondary material was drawn from newspaper articles following Helen's death in 1997.

In terms of the time period examined, the paper concentrates on the early years of Helen Lowe's career, her pursuit of an accountancy qualification in the 1910s, her training within an accountancy firm and the establishment of her own practice in 1928. Her first years in business, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, are a particular focus of the study. The accounting ledgers and correspondence for this period witness the struggles inherent in setting up a new business as a single woman, Helen's diversification into a range of services other than the traditional audit work, and the gendered nature of her client base. The interview data, together with newspaper

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<sup>1</sup> Since the writing of this paper, the McLeish collection of papers has been deposited with the University of Edinburgh Library.

articles reveal supplementary material relating to Helen's charitable campaigns outside of office hours and the notoriety, some of it unwelcome, that she received in the wake of her death.

#### *4.1 Early years*

Helen Lowe was born on the 10th December 1897 in the town of Duns, in the east of Scotland (Helen's birth certificate). The second daughter of Margaret and James Lowe, a coal merchant (death certificate of James Lowe), the family moved to reside in Edinburgh when Helen was a teenager. Early evidence of Helen's independent spirit is suggested by the fact that at sixteen years of age she left her comfortable middle class home in the Edinburgh suburbs to live and work in London. She was employed as a clerk in the Savings Bank Department of the General Post Office from September 1914 to April 1919 (Certificate of Character from GPO). It is unclear as to what prompted this move but perhaps one motivation was that it was the same year (1914) that her elder sister Janet enrolled as a languages student at the University of Edinburgh. Whatever the reasoning, the move appears to have shocked her parents, according to one of Helen's late cousins:

She was born to a family that was comfortably off, she wouldn't have had to go out to work, in fact her parents were scandalised when she decided to become a career woman (Interview with Andrew Lowe, Sunday Times, 15 November 1998).

Helen left her position with the Post Office in April 1919. Her Certificate of Character from them indicated that she left "for private reasons". Although, it is also

likely that she, similar to the countless other female clerks of the era, was encouraged to vacate her post to make way for the veterans of the Great War. In any event, Helen returned to live with her parents in Edinburgh. However, her clerical work experience in London seems to have exposed her to the idea of pursuing an accountancy career. Indeed, although her official job title within the Post Office was that of clerk, her work experience seems to have been within the accounting field as within two months of her return to Scotland, in June 1919, Helen sat her final examinations with the London Association of Accountants in their Edinburgh exam hall venue (letter from LAA in May 1919). As noted in the previous section, this was the only professional accountancy body at this time that admitted female members. In addition, membership was based not only on passing examinations but also on achieving five years of practical accounting experience. Helen achieved “excellent marks” in this examination (letter from LAA in July 1919) and subsequently was admitted to membership to become an A.L.A.A. (Associate of the London Association of Accountants); she was 21 years old.

Helen then immediately commenced employment with the Edinburgh chartered accountancy firm Chiene and Tait in 1919 (letter from Helen to Mrs Sharp, 7<sup>th</sup> January 1929). With the passing of the Sex Discrimination (Removal) Bill which allowed women to become members of the Scottish chartered accountancy bodies, Helen registered as an articled clerk with her employers, and on passing her examinations, was admitted to membership of the Society of Accountants in Edinburgh (now known as the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland (ICAS)) in 1926 (ibid.). Helen was the second woman to qualify as a chartered accountant with the Edinburgh Society, and the fourth in all of Scotland (ICAS membership records).

To put her achievement into further context, of the forty women who took up indentures with the Scottish accounting profession during the period 1920-29, only twenty-five qualified for admission as members (Shackleton, 1999, p.151). The rare nature of her achievement is captured in a letter from her old school teacher, in which he congratulates Helen on her “splendid and most unusual success” (letter from Mr Mabbott, 13<sup>th</sup> September 1926). A photograph of Helen taken sometime around this period is illustrated in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1

Helen continued to work for Chiene and Tait after qualification, specialising mostly in income tax work (letter to Mr Roberts, 18<sup>th</sup> December 1928). She was very much alone in life by this stage, having lost her father in 1921 and subsequently her mother in 1926 (parents death certificates). Although, she did have the company of her sister in the old family home, where they both continued to reside. It is not completely clear as to why Helen left the employment of Chiene and Tait to establish her own practice, however, a letter from one of her friends indicates that the working environment had become uncomfortable for Helen following the appointment of a new partner at the firm:

I quite appreciate what your feelings must have been to hear about the new partner and can quite understand how you had to do something rather than continue there. (Letter from Mrs Cuninghame, 8<sup>th</sup> January 1929).



One possibility could be that Helen resented the new partner's promotion ahead of her own; she had been with the firm for nine years at this stage. Whatever, the motives, Helen took the rather courageous step of setting up her own accountancy practice as a single woman in November 1928, a few weeks short of her 31<sup>st</sup> birthday.

#### *4.2 A practice of her own*

The premises she leased for her new venture had an annual rent of £25 and was located in “the back room on the first floor” of number 28 Queen Street in Edinburgh (letter from Edinburgh property agent, 9<sup>th</sup> November 1928). In addition to having a central location, this property also enjoyed the benefit of being situated next door to the headquarters of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland.

Drawing on the firm's old ledgers and the surviving business letters, the minutia of this start up phase can be captured. For example, Figure 2 illustrates the first page of Helen's Cashbook Ledger which reveals that her capital injection into the new practice on the 12<sup>th</sup> November 1928 amounted to a little over £54 (Cashbook Ledger).

Insert Figure 2

With this modest sum, Helen began to furnish her new office. On the same day, she purchased a Remington typewriter for £32 and within the month she had acquired further office necessities such as a carpet, table and chairs (Cashbook Ledger). By the 15<sup>th</sup> of November, Helen had received word that her request for a telephone line had been granted (letter from Telephone House, Post Office). The

symbolic act of setting up a brass name plate for the practice was conducted at a cost of 16 shillings at the end of her first month (Cashbook Ledger). A homely touch was added in December with the acquisition of a hearth rug and some loose covers from Liberty (Cashbook Ledger). A more defining moment was the framing of her ICAS membership certificate in January 1929, good value at £12 and 6 shillings, as the same frame is still proudly hanging in her founding firm (Cashbook Ledger). A copy of this certificate is illustrated in Figure 3.

Insert Figure 3

Helen describes this period of her career in a letter to her cousin Robert in the month following the opening of her practice:

I decided to leave my old office at the end of October, and since then I have had quite a busy time acquiring this one-roomed office, where I intend to act as my own assistant, typist, postage boy and anything else combined until I see how things are going to go (Letter to Cousin Robert, 17<sup>th</sup> December 1928).

Helen's letter archive indicates that she was fully aware of the novelty of her situation as a single woman accounting practitioner and the struggle that she might face in creating a successful business in a man's world. She observes to one friend: "I do not expect to find that I have set myself an easy task, because one has to face the prejudice there is against women in professions" (letter to a Mr Mabbott, 17<sup>th</sup> December 1928). In another epistle, she acknowledges "I think I am the first woman who has seriously started in Scotland" and describes herself as: "a would-be pioneer

in one of the most conservative professions” (letter to a Miss Low, 17<sup>th</sup> December 1928). The replies which Helen receives from her friends on informing them of her new employment situation also capture the unusual nature of her changed circumstances. Her former school teacher congratulates Helen on her “courageous adventure” (letter from Mr Mabbott, 18<sup>th</sup> December 1928) while her cousin Robert confirms “adventure it is but I know you will overcome all obstacles and win through” (letter from cousin Robert, 27<sup>th</sup> December 1928). Other friends similarly refer to her “courage” and “pluck” in starting up her own firm (letters from Miss Low, 18<sup>th</sup> December 1928 and Mrs Cuninghame, 8<sup>th</sup> January 1929).

#### *4.3 Advertising strategies*

One of the first challenges Helen faced in her new practice was to find work. In this task she was severely hampered by the advertising restrictions which applied to the accountancy profession. The most she could undertake in the way of formally advertising her services was to place the following simple announcement in the ICAS journal, *The Accountants’ Magazine*, in February 1929:

Miss Helen M. Lowe, C.A., intimates that she has commenced the practice of her profession at 28 Queen Street, Edinburgh. (Letter to *The Accountants Magazine*, 7<sup>th</sup> January 1929).

However, Helen attempted to overcome such formal advertising restrictions by engaging in an informal self promotion strategy. Her business correspondence for her first couple of months in operation is littered with letters of introduction to an array of acquaintances, and friends of acquaintances. Within these letters, she enclosed her

business card and requested that they keep her in mind if they, or any of their friends and associates, required professional services. A good example of such a letter of introduction is illustrated in Figure 4.

Insert Figure 4

As can be seen from the letter in Figure 4, in addition to accounting work, Helen also marketed her specialist taxation experience to potential clients. Another field of expertise that she promoted at this stage related to share investments, an area in which she subsequently became heavily involved, and indeed well known for within the business community (Interview with John Curister). She believed that accountants could undertake such investments for clients, and other business related issues such as arranging insurance, much better than her colleagues in the law profession. The following letter captures her thoughts on this matter quite effectively:

While I was with Chiene & Tait, besides doing a lot of the ordinary accounting work, I did practically all their Income Tax work, both for companies and business concerns and also for professional and private people. I also did a good deal of work in connection with arranging investments and insurances. It is because I think there is a lot of work to be done in this way; especially now that women are going into professions and business so much, that I thought it worth while to start. Un-fortunately, a great many people take all their troubles of this kind to their lawyers, who do it a good deal less efficiently and more expensively than we, because it is not really a part of their training. (Letter to Mrs Sharp, 7<sup>th</sup> January 1929).

In addition to promoting her new venture, Helen's letter writing during the early months of her practice also served the useful purpose of improving her typewriting skills. As she employed no secretary in this period, the typewriting practice proved helpful, as she recounts to a friend in January 1929:

I hope you will not be alarmed to see a business looking letter. I am inflicting all my friends with my efforts at typing these days, because, you see, I never typed at all until about two months ago, and I want to get to the stage where my proper business letters cease to look too amateurish. (Letter to Mrs Cuninghame, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1929).

It is interesting to note that Helen's lack of type writing skills is actually quite symbolic of a broader issue, it symbolises the fact that Helen had undertaken a training in a profession which had sought very hard to differentiate itself from the legions of clerical, bookkeeping and secretarial posts that had emerged by the end of the nineteenth century.

#### *4.4 Sources of firm income*

Helen's marketing efforts appeared to pay off as within a month of opening, on 10th December 1928, she received her first client, a Mrs Christie, who engaged Helen to invest the rather considerable sum of £1,042 on her behalf. That Helen's first client was a woman, and a woman wishing to invest in the stock market, is perhaps not too surprising. As Maltby and Rutterford (2006) have shown, women were important investors in the stock market from the late nineteenth century. Investing clients' monies in shares became one of the mainstay activities of Helen's practice. The

business letter archive indicates that in making such decisions, Helen often sought investment advice from the investment magazine the Investors' Chronicle.

In February 1929, within three months of opening, Helen invested £1,500 of a client's funds in the shares of the Woolwich Equitable Building Society (Cashbook Ledger). This organisation was to prove a permanent fixture in Helen's business life. One of the UK's earliest building societies, the Woolwich Equitable Building Society was established in 1847 (Brooks, 1947). However, its first branch did not open until 1923, and by 1928, the year in which Helen founded her practice, its branch network was still limited to the London area (ibid.). Consequently, the use of a network of local agents across the UK was vital for business. Agents generally comprised local solicitors, estate agents, or accountants (ibid.). Helen secured this agency within two months of opening her firm. How she achieved this position is unclear, however it is likely that her entrepreneurial nature prompted her to apply directly to the Society for the post. This is suggested by the fact that the minutes of the meeting of the Woolwich Branch Offices Committee in October 1928, two months before Helen was appointed as agent, indicate that agents were drawn from candidates who approached the Society, rather than it being the case of the Society selecting its own candidates (Barclays Group Archives). Helen's satisfaction at receiving this agency is apparent in a letter to a friend later that month:

My small affairs are progressing wonderfully, considering the length of time I've been at it. I've already acquired one or two bits of income tax work ... and last, but by no means least, got myself appointed Edinburgh Agent of the Woolwich Equitable Building Society. I was very glad to get the last

appointment, because it's a thoroughly sound concern, and as they have only just opened up in Scotland, there are good possibilities. (Letter to Mrs Cuninghame, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1929).

Helen's instinct regarding the future business potential of the Woolwich agency proved to be accurate. By 1933, her territory as agent for the Society had expanded beyond the city of Edinburgh to encompass East Scotland more broadly, ranging from Dundee to the Borders (minutes of meeting of the Woolwich's Branch Offices Committee, February 1933, Barclays Group Archives). The scope of her activities with the Woolwich also expanded beyond share investment to encompass mortgage arrangement. This latter service proved particularly popular with Helen's female clients. The firm's archive reveals that as early as 1932, Helen, acting as a mortgage agent for the Woolwich, had facilitated mortgages for two of her single female clients (Cashbook Ledger, May and November 1932).

Helen's foray into the world of mortgages, and stocks and shares to earn a living is perhaps not only indicative of her entrepreneurial spirit but probably also suggestive of the innovative strategies which a female accountancy practitioner had to deploy in this era. The public nature of audit work entailed that it was viewed as the exclusive domain of men. Helen's nine years in an Edinburgh accountancy practice, where she appears to have been assigned the more 'feminine' task of income tax work, would have exposed her to this general prejudice. Consequently, Helen most likely started her new practice knowing that she would have to offer a diversified portfolio of services to her clients. Certainly income tax work was a staple product that she offered from the early days – the records reveal that she was preparing and

lodging income tax returns for her clients within a few months of opening (Cashbook Ledger, January and March 1929). However, acting as an investment and mortgage broker was one means of acquiring additional business. Another means involved arranging insurance policies for her clients, particularly her female ones. Within six months of opening, the business letter archive reveals that Helen had received a correspondence from the General Accident Fire & Life Assurance Corporation indicating that she had consulted with them over their various insurance policies and the commission payable on acting as their agent. In addition, the Cashbook Ledger shows that in the same month of April, she arranged the car insurance for a female client and later in the year (August 1929) handled the fire insurance premium for the Scottish Women's Club (Cashbook Ledger).

Acting as an executor of estates was another arena into which Helen ventured in seeking work for her new practice. She was employed in the division of a client's estate from as early as January 1930 (Cashbook Ledger). Helen's activity in this field of work may be a useful reflection of her thoughts on the legal profession, and its limitations, as indicated in an earlier correspondence. Certainly, she did not seem to have any qualms over extending her duties into terrain generally regarded as the preserve of the legal profession; it appears that she even drew up wills for her clients (Interview with John Curister).

A further source of firm income for Helen, particularly in the start up period, was from tutoring activities in accountancy and bookkeeping. In the summer of 1929 she took on five students of accountancy, her fee per lesson amounting to one pound and one shilling (Cashbook Ledger). Her students were generally male and the



tutoring appears to be for the purpose of preparing them for the ICAS professional examinations. The proximity of Helen's office to ICAS headquarters appears to have proved very useful in acquiring such work as a letter from one her pupils indicates (letter from Mr Sanderson, 18<sup>th</sup> March 1929). Interestingly, even within tutoring activities, the gendered aspect of the accountancy profession is evident. Helen's only female tutee (a Miss Ross) received tuition in 'bookkeeping' rather than for the purposes of professional accountancy exams (Cashbook Ledger, March 1931).

#### *4.5 The gendered nature of Helen's practice*

As a single woman practitioner operating in an overwhelmingly male profession, Helen no doubt posed an attractive option to female clientele. It could be argued that the gendered nature of the accountancy profession may have even acted as a positive influence on Helen's practice, opened doors to her that might not have been so welcoming to a male practitioner. As noted above, within months of opening for business, Helen was acting as stock broker, mortgage broker, and insurance agent to a female client base. In addition to providing such ad hoc services to individual female clients however, Helen cultivated more formal business arrangements with groupings of women. For example, Helen's gender provided her with a host of opportunities to cater for the business needs of local women's clubs and societies. It appears that Helen was only too aware of the business potential from this source from the outset. In a letter to a friend only a couple of months after opening her practice, Helen remarks:

[I've] got the honorary secretaryship of a Girls Home, which brings me in contact with some very nice people, and is an excellent advertisement. (Letter to Mrs Cuninghame, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1929).

Helen's membership of the Soroptimist Club (a club for women in management and the professions to advance human rights and women's causes) may also have exposed her to a gathering of potential new female clients (Cashbook Ledger, September 1931). An examination of Helen's General Ledger, Fees and Commissions Ledger and Cashbook Ledger for the 1930s reveals numerous women's organisations for whom Helen acted as treasurer, auditor, secretary, or insurance agent. Helen's services to women in this regard perhaps ought not be interpreted purely as an act of sisterhood. It is worth noting, that these services were an important component of her business portfolio and were generally well paid. For example, Helen received a fee of £26 for acting as secretary of the Scottish Women's Club (Cashbook, December 1929), £46 for acting as auditor of the Scottish Society of Women Artists, and £73 for acting as treasurer of Highland Home Industries (Fees and Commission Ledger, 1938).

In addition to acting for women's organisations, Helen also conducted the business affairs of her numerous individual female clients. Not all of these possessed the monies of Helen's first female client, Mrs Christie. By contrast, many, such as Miss Simpson, engaged Helen to invest their modest sums, in this case £5 in the Woolwich Savings Bank (Cashbook Ledger, June 1930). It is difficult to determine the gender division of Helen's practice in terms actual fee income however, it is clear that the female component of her client base increased over time. In her first year of

trading the split between male and female clients was roughly equal (Cashbook Ledger). Throughout the 1930s, by contrast, her female clients outnumbered her male clients by approximately two to one (General Ledger 1933-1938).

#### *4.6 Up and running*

Helen's financial year for accounting purposes corresponded with the tax year: year ending 5<sup>th</sup> April. Despite Helen's best efforts, her first five months in business (November 1928 – April 1929) yielded a loss of £27 (Nominal Ledger). However, this trend did not last long and by the time she reached the end of her first full financial year (5<sup>th</sup> April 1930), Helen had generated a profit of £136 (Nominal Ledger). During this period, Helen received a communication which indicates that she may have quickly come to be regarded as an eminent personage in Scottish business life. She received a letter from the Press Secretary of Lafayette Photographers (a firm in possession of a royal warrant and a number of branches throughout the UK and Ireland) inviting Helen to sit for a portrait at their Glasgow branch. The portrait, to be taken at no fee, was to become part of a series: "comprising persons eminent in science, art, law, medicine, literature, politics, and social life." (Information leaflet enclosed with letter). The purported purpose of the portrait was outlined as follows:

This department is supposed to hold portraits of every important person occupying a public or official position, and if you consider you will understand, that in allowing our Press Department to hold a thoroughly satisfactory and approved portrait of yourself, you at once make provision against the Illustrated papers when occasion arises, having to use unauthorised snapshots of you,

which are so painfully unlike and unsatisfactory. (Letter from Lafayette Photographers, Glasgow, 5<sup>th</sup> September 1929).

Clearly pleased to be considered part of such a prestigious grouping, or perhaps recognising the usefulness of having a readily available photograph for business purposes, Helen responded in the affirmative to Lafayette Photographers the very next day (Letter dated 6<sup>th</sup> September).

If the above communication can be read as suggestive of Helen's progress within the business community, another letter within the archive is perhaps indicative of the contrary, or at least reminds us of the challenges that she and other pioneering women of the era must have encountered in pursuing a professional career. In February 1930, a little over a year of starting up her practice, Helen received the following letter:

Dear Madam

The Secretary of the Society in Edinburgh [ICAS] has given me your name and address as being a lady CA who might possibly be interested in a vacancy I have been asked to find applicants for. The lady required has preferably to have a knowledge of shorthand and typewriting, and is to act as private secretary to the Managing Director of a leading firm of Consulting Engineers in London, with a view to taking charge of the secretarial side of the company's business. She would ultimately have full charge of the accounts and staff. I was asked to find a Scottish lady CA for this vacancy, and your name is one of three which have been brought to my notice. If the vacancy appeals to you, I shall be glad if you

give me an outline of your particulars, and I shall forward it to London for their consideration, and you can then deal with them direct. (Letter from Allan Ogilvie, CA, Montrose, 1<sup>st</sup> February 1930).

This correspondence is interesting in that it provides a useful insight into how the role of the woman chartered accountant was perceived at this time, essentially as a form of superior secretary. Helen's reply to this invitation was brief, declining the proposal whilst also attempting to distinguish her professional qualifications from those of a skilled secretary by observing that her training was not in the fields of shorthand and typewriting:

Dear Sir

I thank you for your letter of yesterday. I very much regret that I would not be a suitable applicant for the post you write of. I know no shorthand, and very little typewriting, and I would not care to leave Edinburgh at the moment, as I have only recently started business on my own account. I should like to thank you for your trouble in writing me about the post, and I hope that you will soon find someone suitable to fill it. (Letter to Allan Ogilvie, CA, Montrose, 4<sup>th</sup> February 1930).

Helen's second full financial year (year ending 5<sup>th</sup> April 1931) also yielded profits. In fact at £250, they amounted to almost double that of her first year (Nominal Ledger). Before reaching this year end, and within two years of the date of first opening her practice, such was the success of her new venture that Helen was forced to move her offices from the single back room at Queen Street to more generous

office accommodation at nearby Charlotte Square (Letter to Landlord, dated, 5<sup>th</sup> November 1930). Helen's office locations may be regarded as a useful indicator of her business acumen. As noted earlier, her Queen Street office had the advantage of close proximity to ICAS headquarters. In Charlotte Square, Helen had once again positioned herself well. Designed by famed Georgian architect Robert Adam, Charlotte Square was one of Edinburgh's most prestigious addresses (Cruickshank and Burton, 1990). Helen ran her practice from this location for the next seventy-seven years, indeed until her death, gradually expanding her terrain from two rooms until she occupied and owned not just the whole building but also the neighbouring one.

#### *4.7 A successful practice*

Although the time period of most interest to this researcher is the early years of Helen Lowe's new practice, looking at the challenges of starting up her business and the sources of income that she secured, it is worth informing the reader how the remaining years progressed. Helen's practice over the longer term was a successful one. The financial records indicate a growing fee income for the firm, matched by increasing annual profits. For example, within ten years in practice (year ending 5<sup>th</sup> April 1939), the firm's fee income amounted to £2,490 and recorded profits were £1,542 (Nominal Ledger). After twenty years in practice (year ending 5<sup>th</sup> April 1949), fee income had increased to £7,015 and annual profits stood at £3,199 (Nominal Ledger). In fact, over the duration of this twenty year period, the firm never once made a loss, and with the exception of one year, reported increases in profits year on year (Nominal Ledger).

An examination of the firm's accounting ledgers for the 1930s indicates that Helen's fee income continued to be drawn from several sources. She still maintained her traditional income tax work and her audit work for women's societies. Executorships, insurance work, and tutorial lessons although not frequent, remained in evidence. However, the overwhelming flow of income into the practice was drawn from Helen's share investment activities, and in particular, from her agency with the Woolwich Building Society. An examination of Helen's Cashbook Ledger reveals the extensive nature of the business she conducted through her agency with the Woolwich. For example, Helen's commission from the Woolwich for the year ending May 1932 amounted to £311, which was almost half of the firm's total fee income for the same period. This was a figure which continued to rise. Within two years, her commission from the Society for a quarter (£251 for October-December 1934) was almost as large as the commission she had previously received on an annual basis. By 1938, her Woolwich commission had reached the sum of £1,979, made more significant by the fact that total fee income for the year amounted to £2,617.

What is also interesting is the sheer scale of the funds that she was investing on behalf of her clients. The debit side of the Cashbook Ledger records the monies that flow into a business during its financial year. The total debit for Helen's Cashbook for the year ending 5<sup>th</sup> April 1935, for example, amounted to over fifty thousand pounds. In other words, excluding the firm's fee income, which for that year was approximately £1,500, the balancing figure represents monies with which Helen had been entrusted to invest by her clients. For a single woman of this era, who had only been in practice for a little over six years, this fact seems quite remarkable. Whether through industriousness, connections or character, or maybe a combination

of all three, Helen Lowe clearly earned the trust of her clients from an early stage. Helen's business partner in latter years indicated that Helen was adept at maintaining a loyal client base (Interview with John Curister). Perhaps this explains the longevity of Helen's practice: the new venture, which her friends thought her most courageous in opening in 1928, was to occupy Helen for almost seventy more years. Her founding firm, now run by her former partner, still carries her name.

#### *4.8 Personality, character and charitable concerns*

It is perhaps useful at this stage, now that the facts and figures associated with Helen's new enterprise have been recounted, to offer some small insight into the character of the woman. Drawing together material from the letter archive, interviews and newspaper articles, enables some light to be shed on Helen's personality. At the outset, it seems reasonable to assume that Helen was in possession of a fairly independent character. Her departure from the family home at the age of sixteen to take up in employment in London seems to provide evidence of this fact. Her pursuit of an accountancy career, to the apparent scandal of her parents, is also suggestive of a strong willed nature. Whilst the majority of the letter correspondence that has survived is predominantly of a business nature, one document provides a glimpse of Helen's forceful character. In response to Robert warning her of a mutual friend's religious zeal, she replies: "I'm afraid I'm too hard headed to make a possible convert" (Letter to Cousin Robert, 5<sup>th</sup> January 1929). Most impressive, however, was the manner in which Helen single handily established her own flourishing accountancy practice within a male dominated industry. Her success, in this regard, was attributed by her cousin Andrew to the possession of a "driving power and



ambition that would make her buckle down to a challenge” (Interview with Andrew Lowe, Guardian, 16th November 1998).

That Helen relished a challenge is also evident from the charitable campaigns she fought throughout her life. This is an area which the author has researched to only a limited extent, concentrating instead on the minutia of her accounting practice. However, to give the reader a more rounded view of the life of Helen Lowe it is useful to at least mention the numerous extracurricular activities in which she was engaged. She was a very active supporter of local charities for the elderly. Her fundraising activities helped to establish three elderly day centres within the city (Obituary<sup>2</sup>) whilst her work for the Edinburgh and Leith Old Peoples Welfare Council was recognised with an MBE (Member of the Order of the British Empire) in 1964 (Obituary; Interview with John Curister). Helen was also very supportive of medical women, perhaps viewing them as another pioneering group of women. For example, she was at the forefront of a successful campaign against the government in the 1950s to safeguard the heritage of Edinburgh’s Bruntsfield Hospital and Elsie Inglis Memorial Maternity Hospital (Obituary; Interview with John Curister). The case surrounded the issue of introducing male doctors into these two establishments which had previously been the exclusive preserve of female doctors up to this point. Perhaps Helen enjoyed this particular battle because it successfully excluded men from the field, the reverse situation to that which she had generally been accustomed. Her dedication to the medical profession was also manifest in her honorary membership of the Medical Women’s Federation and in her fifty years of service to the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh Volunteers (Obituary; Interview with John Curister). She also

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<sup>2</sup> Helen’s obituary appeared in the Scotsman newspaper, 19<sup>th</sup> November, 1997.

became personally involved with many of the women's organizations for whom she acted in a business capacity, such as the Scottish Women's Rural Institute (Interview with John Curister) and the Scottish Society of Women Artists (Interview with Sheila McLeish) to name but a few.

This condensed version of the broad ranging initiatives with which Helen was actively involved throughout her life has hopefully added some additional insights into her character. It certainly provides a contrary picture to the stereotypical characterisation of accountants as one dimensional bean-counters (Jeacle, 2008). The evidence indicates that Helen appears to have been as passionate about the wellbeing of the community around her as of the success of her own private practice.

Ironically, Helen's seemingly formidable character was encased in a small frame. Her body often appearing weighed down by the animal fur coats she always wore (Interview with Sheila McLeish). The latter aspect of her dress provided much hilarity amongst the guests she regularly hosted for Sunday lunch at the clubhouse of Edinburgh Zoo (ibid.). Interestingly, although Helen never married, her friends and acquaintances recall her warm rapport with men at such social gatherings (Interview with Sheila McLeish, Interview with Valerie Gage, Evening News (Edinburgh) 14th November 1998). The caricature of embittered old spinster, resentful of the privileged position of men within her profession, does not seem to be one that attaches easily to Helen. On the contrary, a hint of Helen's fun sense of humour can be gleaned from a letter which she wrote to a friend in February 1930. Recounting a social engagement she had recently endured, Helen mischievously observes:

I must say we suffered from Mrs Turner's vocal organs from 3.30 till 11 last Sunday, with an interlude of duet between her and Rita, so we felt a bit the worse for the wear yesterday. (Letter to Mrs Hardie, 4<sup>th</sup> Feb. 1930)

#### *4.9 Death and notoriety*

Helen had continued to live in her old family home throughout her life. In spinsterhood, she enjoyed for many years the company of her sister Janet, who like Helen, also never married and continued to reside with her in the family home. Janet had graduated with a first class honours degree in Modern Languages (French and German) in 1918 from the University of Edinburgh (University of Edinburgh records). Although she had initially taken up a teaching post, it appears from Helen's letters, that by the mid 1920s, Janet had abandoned this career in favour of one as housekeeper to Helen (Letters to Cousin Robert, 5<sup>th</sup> January 1929 and Mrs Cuninghame, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1929). This was a role Janet continued to play until her death in 1966, leaving Helen to live alone for the next thirty years of her own life.

Helen Lowe died in November 1997, a few weeks shy of her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. Rather amazingly, she was still putting in an eight hour working day, five days a week, until shortly before her death (Interview with John Curister). Her death, when it came, created somewhat of a shock for her extended family and work colleagues, not least because of the significant monetary value of the estate she left behind. In the course of her business life, Helen had acquired a fortune of almost seven million pounds, made up from property, art holdings and share investments. However, ironically given her own executorships work, Helen herself had never made a will. The rationale behind such a lapse in conscientiousness has been puzzled upon by

those close to her. John Curister, her partner in the Helen Lowe accountancy practice believed that Helen had never really contemplated death as something imminent despite her advancing years (Interview with John Curister). Her late cousin, on the other hand, ventures a more provocative rationale:

We all knew she was rich, maybe even a millionaire, but nobody suspected she was worth this – and the fact that she never made a will didn't make sense ... We've spent a long time discussing it and have come to the conclusion that it probably wasn't an oversight. She was a stubborn old rascal. (Interview with Andrew Lowe in Sunday Times, 15 November 1998).

Given the lack of a will, nor the presence of any immediately close relatives, Helen's assets were temporarily frozen pending an investigation. The public hunt for relatives that ensued, together with the scale of the fortune, not surprisingly brought about a lot of press publicity at the time. The story of a one hundred year old spinster, who had lived modestly in her old family home all of her life, whilst at the same time sitting on a several million pound fortune, appeared to enthrall both the local and national press. It was often sensational in nature (Interview with John Curister). Sadly, but perhaps inevitably, a characterisation of Helen began to unfold that appears not to be completely founded in truth. She was portrayed as the millionaire spinster who went about in a tatty old fur coat (Scotland on Sunday, November 15th, 1998). Apparently the tale of the miserly millionaire who lived in rags was an all too easy one to tell. However, it was perhaps not a fitting memory for a woman who had been one of the accountancy profession's female pioneers and who had been at the forefront of several charitable campaigns throughout her life. It was also a

characterisation that upset Helen's relatives and friends, who remembered a rather different Helen, and one who always dressed immaculately (Interview with Sheila McLeish). One other memory of Helen pervades which perhaps captures the essence of her seemingly indomitable spirit. Those who visited her on her hospital deathbed recall that she did not seem to wear an expression of peace (Interview with Sheila McLeish). In fact, it was quite to the contrary, as her cousin recounts:

I think she resented being called away. We saw her just after she'd died and she looked pretty angry. She probably thought it was a waste of time to die when she could have been working. (Interview with Andrew Lowe, Sunday Times, 15 November 1998).

## **5. Discussion**

The career of Helen Lowe mirrors the challenges which British women more generally had to face within the accounting profession. Helen belonged to that early grouping of women who were initially denied entry into the profession due to their gender. As noted in the literature review earlier, the only professional body that welcomed female members at this stage was the relatively newly formed London Association of Accountants who opened their doors to women in 1909. This association was also unique in that it did not require its students to be articled to an accountancy firm, five years of practical accounting experience was sufficient. Both of these conditions allowed Helen to take her first step towards an accountancy career. Her early position in the Post Office, although defined as clerical, was evidently of a bookkeeping nature in that her five years of work experience with them was validated by the London Association of Accountants as constituting relevant practical

accounting knowledge. Helen's departure from her position in the Post Office may have been due to personal reasons, a desire to return to friends and family in Edinburgh perhaps. Although, as the gender literature has indicated, the timing of her departure is also consistent with that of the discriminatory practices which were deployed against female clerks in general in the wake of the return of ex-service men.

However, despite the disadvantages of her gender, by the young age of twenty-one, Helen had achieved membership of the LAA and had secured a position with an Edinburgh based accountancy firm. The legislative reforms of 1919 allowed her to consolidate this position by registering as an articled clerk with the firm and subsequently becoming a member of one of the Scottish professional accountancy bodies that had been previously denied to her. Consequently by the age of twenty-eight, Helen had achieved her second accountancy qualification. Helen's time with the Edinburgh firm echoes the experiences of early female accountants more generally. From her letters it is clear that Helen specialised in tax and investment work rather than in auditing. The public nature of audit work, requiring travel and visits to sites not suitable for women, had been the argument used by the profession to initially deny women access to entry (Kirkham and Loft, 1993). Even after legal restrictions were lifted, the strategy of denying women employees access to audit work appeared to continue and was then used as the rationale by accounting firms to prevent them from gaining partnership positions (Spruill and Wootton, 1995). It is impossible to say with certainty whether this was the situation that Helen also experienced. However, what is clear from the archival material is that Helen was prompted to leave her old training firm following the appointment of a new male partner. Whether her annoyance was due to a sense of injustice, given her own nine

years of experience with the firm, and the possession of two professional accountancy qualifications, or whether it was due to more personal circumstances, is open to question. However, the incident created a significant fork in Helen's career path. Rather than staying on within the firm and potentially pursuing a relatively safe but perhaps unfulfilling career in terms of promotional prospects, Helen opted for what her friends regarded as a more courageous adventure. In 1928, when the cult of domesticity was herding women back to the homestead, Helen established her own practice.

There is little within the accounting gender literature from which to compare and contrast Helen's early business years. As has been noted earlier, the history of women and the accounting profession is mainly concentrated on either the struggle to gain admittance to the profession or the subsequent accounts of career discrimination once they had achieved such entry. There is a dearth of material on women accountants who took the rather unusual step of setting up their own practice. However, from the little evidence that does exist on the lives of early female accounting pioneers, it is possible to draw at least two comparisons. An interest in education is one common theme. For example, Helen's tutoring activities in the early years of her practice are replicated in the biographies of other female accountants of the era. One of Australia's first female accountants Mary Addison Hamilton similarly engaged in bookkeeping tuition to male accountancy students (Cooper, 2008) while the early American CPA Jennie Palen pursued a career in education following her retirement (Spruill and Wootton, 1995). The second commonality which emerges relates to the women's causes to which early pioneers like Helen became committed. For example, Mary Addison Hamilton acted as auditor and treasurer for a number of

charitable bodies which sought to advance the causes of women (Cooper, 2008), Jennie Palen was heavily involved with the American Woman's Society of Certified Public Accountants in their efforts to reduce discrimination within the profession (Spruill and Wootton, 1995), and Ethel Purdie, the UK's first female professional accountant, supported women's struggle through her tax work for the Women's Freedom League (Kirkham and Loft, 1993).

As the archive material has shown, Helen was also devoted to furthering the cause of women. This manifested itself in several ways. Outside of her business hours, Helen was actively involved in supporting Edinburgh's women medics in their fight to maintain female only staffing at local hospitals. Within business, she acted as auditor/treasurer/secretary for a host of women clubs and associations. Of course the latter activity was also a useful source of income for the firm. In this manner, Helen's gender, a disadvantage both in gaining entry to the profession and in seeking promotion once within it, became an attractive feature of her own practice. Women were important clients for Helen. As noted earlier, women were influential stock market investors by the late nineteenth century (Maltby and Rutterford, 2006) so it is not surprising that Edinburgh women should turn to a female accountant to conduct their investments and other business affairs. Helen also acted as their insurance broker and arranged their mortgages.

Helen's ventures into providing her clients with such a diverse range of business services is potentially linked to the work experience, or more accurately the lack of auditing experience, that she received in her old training firm. In other words, Helen's diversification strategy into such fields as executorships, investment advice,



insurance and mortgage brokerage, may reflect not only an entrepreneurial nature but also the situation into which she was prompted given her lack of audit experience. In this manner, Helen turned the discriminatory practices of the established accounting profession to her own advantage. It was an advantage which ultimately reaped financial rewards; the investment brokerage aspect of her business became a significant component of her practice income.

With regard to any gender discrimination that Helen may have encountered during the course of running her own practice, this is not particularly in evidence from the archive material. The exception to this is the letter that Helen received inviting her to apply for a senior secretarial post. This correspondence is interesting in that it captures one perception of female accountants of the era, that of glorified secretaries. However, other than this epistle, the archive contains no reference to suggest that Helen's gender had an adverse affect on her business opportunities. For example, her gender seemed to make no difference to the presumably male members of the Woolwich Equitable Building Society who appointed her as their sole Edinburgh agent within months of opening. Nor did her gender prevent her appointment as a broker with the General Accident Fire & Life Assurance Corporation. As the archive has also revealed, Helen's investment activities involved handling often significant sums of money for both male and female clients who presumably trusted her competencies for the task. Her receipt of a letter of invitation to pose for a portrait from Lafayette Photographers may also be taken as a reflection of the Scottish business community's acknowledgement of the public status of Helen Lowe Chartered Accountant.

Helen's story may have insightful repercussions for our understanding of women's career success within the accounting profession and business more generally. Whether Helen would have achieved career success, measured in terms of promotion to the position of partnership, if she had remained within her old accounting firm is doubtful. The first female partner within this firm was not appointed until the decade of Helen's death (Correspondence with Chiene and Tait). This is no poor reflection on this particular firm, indeed this firm was amongst the early recruiters of women into the profession in Scotland. It is simply, as the gender literature has shown, a product of the times and the more widespread discrimination against women within accounting firms. From this perspective, Helen's decision to forge a career outside of her old accounting firm turned out to be a shrewd one. If success is measured in terms of longevity and financial rewards, then Helen's new venture would arguably be characterised as such; she ran her practice for almost seventy years and her initial capital investment of £54 ultimately yielded a several million pounds estate. Consequently, Helen's career success, beyond the boundaries of the firm, supports the gender literature in suggesting the inherent existence of discriminatory practices within the accounting firm. Perhaps more importantly, in the face of poor promotion prospects for women, particularly to partner level, Helen's story provides evidence of an alternative path for women accountants to pursue. In establishing their own businesses, women may not only achieve the career success denied to them within the firm, but may also turn their female gender to their advantage.

## **6. Concluding remarks**

As Hopwood (1987) has observed, there is more to the issue of gender and accounting than simply the study of the sexual composition of the profession, insightful as this may be. The deployment of a feminist theoretical perspective from which to consider accounting practice, he suggests, is one means by which the gender debate could be expanded. Similarly Cooper (2001) argues that rather than merely recount women's progression within the profession, it is also useful to consider gender issues from the perspective of accounting's role in the exploitation of women and other minorities. Notwithstanding these observations, this researcher believes that it is still important to capture the pioneer story of the early female accountant. It is important not only in order to honour the memory of such characters, but also to learn something new about accounting and gender more generally. For example, the pioneer story adds colour to the more generic accounts of women's struggle to gain entry into the accounting profession. It provides a richer understanding of the personal impact of the discriminatory practices which the literature has identified as operating within the practice firm. Each pioneer story yields a new interpretation of the broader issue of gender and the accounting profession, not merely a variation on a theme.

As noted at the outset of this paper, one of its objectives is to supplement the gender history of women in the accounting profession, particularly Shackleton's (1999) history of the Scottish profession, by providing an illustration of one woman's story within that context. The fact that Helen Lowe established her own practice, and hence created an archive of ledgers and documents, provides a rare opportunity to release the voice of the pioneer female accountant and business woman. In so doing, the paper potentially helps redress the general neglect of women and gender in

accounting history. A further objective of the paper is to render fresh interpretations of our understanding of career success for female accountants. Apparently viewed as a negative attribute within the accounting firm, gender may take on an altogether different character beyond the confines of its domain. In running a successful accountancy business, Helen used her gender to her advantage, from soliciting female clients to engaging in business services beyond the traditional scope of masculine gendered auditing. Consequently, establishing a practice of one's own may provide women with an opportunity to avoid the discrimination inherent within the professional accounting firm. Indeed, female gender may even be a positive attribute to achieving business success.

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