

Spotlight on Mary Wager Fisher (1846 – 1915)

At the time of her death in 1915, Mary Wager Fisher, a member of the Alfred University Class of 1863, was considered a pre-eminent Victorian journalist in the United States. She lived much of her life in Bryn Mawr, PA and her obituary appeared in the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*. It said she was “a journalist and writer of national repute” noting that “Mrs. Fisher was one of the most brilliant women journalists of her day. She was the first woman Washington correspondent of the New York Herald and was also on the staff of the Tribune, the World, the Sun, the Evening Mail, and the Daily Graphic.... For more than 15 years she was the American correspondent of the Register, published in London and Paris, and was the author of countless poems, stories, and articles.... She was a supporter of the feminine movement and knew most of the suffrage leaders. Her political articles were so vigorous and inclusive that they were frequently thought to be written by a man. Her defense of medicine as a profession for women appeared in the Galaxy in 1868 and brought her national fame.”

As an example, one article she wrote in 1882 for the *Christian Union* involved her in a national conversation with Henry Ward Beecher, the famous abolitionist preacher in New York City. They were discussing the pros and cons of the proposed Chinese Exclusion Act being considered by Congress. (It was signed into law by President Arthur in 1882 creating one of the most significant restrictions on immigration in US history; it prohibited Chinese laborers from coming to the US and was not repealed until 1943.) Mary’s article “American Women and the Anti-Chinese Bill: A Woman’s Protest” outlined her defense of why it was the duty of American women to protest the bill. One argument made by supporters of the bill was that the male Chinese servants would take jobs from the white women in domestic service which was “respectable work” provided to their gender. Losing the jobs would force them to become prostitutes and it would be a threat to the white race. Mary did not agree with the bill and was at the same time pushing for reform in domestic services. She saw the Chinese Question as part of a larger problem that involved social, political, and economic issues.

Mary was married to William Richter Fisher, a middle-class lawyer. Together they were social reformers and active members of the Freeman’s Bureau, involved in promoting the education of former slaves. During Reconstruction, Mary taught in freeman schools in Richmond, VA. These values and ideals of social justice were also found at Alfred; it’s likely that Mary’s beliefs were strongly influenced by her time at the University. In particular, the influence of Abigail Allen who also supported the freeman schools and women’s rights.

Mary was also a founding member of the Philadelphia Geographical Society. A collection of her and William’s personal papers is located at Duke University. After her death, William endowed the Mary Wager Fisher Literary Prize at Alfred University which is awarded annually to one or more students as a prize for excellence in literary composition.