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Article

# Women in Britain's First Muslim Mosques: Hidden from History, but Not Without Influence

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**Abstract:** Two of the earliest Muslim communities in Britain evolved around the first mosques in Liverpool and Woking (both—1889). The history of these early British Muslims is being recovered but little is known about the women (usually converts) in these communities. This article will draw upon original findings from archival research, to examine ‘leadership’ that women in these communities undertook and their influence in shaping their nascent British Muslim communities. The practical, theological and philosophical negotiations around gender roles, female leadership, and veiling and the social contexts within which they took place are examined. By uncovering historical responses to issues that remain topical in British Muslim communities, this article provides historical grounding for contemporary debates about female Muslim leadership in British Muslim communities.

**Keywords:** Muslim women; leadership; British Muslim history; feminism; feminist history; British Islam; British Muslim studies; mosques

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## 1. Introduction: Women in Britain's First Mosques

This article uses archival material linked to the two earliest British Muslim mosques, to examine the everyday lives of women in these historical communities and relates these insights to contemporary concerns about gender roles in Islam.

The earliest Muslim communities in Britain evolved around the first mosques in Liverpool and Woking (both—1889). Muslim communities also emerged in the ports of Liverpool, Cardiff, East London and South Shields where c. 1836 onwards communities of ‘lascar’ sailors settled. In the Liverpool and Woking communities, women were usually middle-class converts, who encountered Islam through travel, mosque publications or public lectures. In port communities, working-class women converted to Islam to marry Muslim sailors. These conversions often took place in social contexts that viewed Islam and Muslims with suspicion and ridicule (Gilham 2014, Ansari 2004). The histories of early British Muslim communities are being recovered (Ansari 2011, 2004, Geaves 2010, Gilham 2014, Halliday 1992, Lawless 1995, Seddon 2014), but prior to my research extremely little was known about the roles and lives of women in these communities.

Focusing on the first two mosques, this article begins to fill this gap and draws upon original findings from archival research, to examine the lives, roles and social influence of women in these two communities. Women’s practical, theological and philosophical negotiations around gender roles, female leadership, modesty and inter-religious relations are contextualized within the historical, social and cultural milieus that these women inhabited.

This article explores the lives of women who lived in social and cultural contexts that were different from contemporary British Muslim communities. They were white and generally middle class, whereas the majority of Muslim women in Britain today are of South Asian heritage, with working-class backgrounds. These differences mean that any comparisons between the historical and the contemporary will at best have significant limitations and at worst be inaccurate. Rather than

compare different women, this article uncovers the lives and stories of the historical women, so that contemporary Muslim women and contemporary society, as a whole, may *know* and *recognize* them.

## 2. Research Methods: Making Manifest whom History Hides

A feminist history approach underpins this research that reinstates Muslim women as actors, storytellers and *storymakers* who have shaped the history of what is often described as ‘British Islam’ (Jones 2013, Jawad 2011, Poole 2002). Feminist history approaches make women visible where they have been hidden within history (Purvis 1992). ‘Women’s historians, like all other historians, are inescapably dependent on their sources’ (Offen et al 1991: xxvi). In its aim to uncover Muslim women’s stories, this research necessitated a systematic analysis of writings by, about or for Muslim women written during the period 1890 to 1948. With the support of a research assistant, I examined and analyzed three sets of archives:

- the Woking Mission archives: available at <http://www.wokingmuslim.org/>: These Woking Mission archives are now mostly online. It includes photographs, short pathé videos, coverage in the Times newspaper to matters relating to the Woking Muslim community, the guest book of the mosque and, significantly for this research, it contains a nearly complete archive of the Islamic Review and Muslim India – a journal produced by the mosque and which was in print from 1913 to 1971. This research only covers the period up to 1948
- the Liverpool Muslim Institute (LMI) archive: available at the Islamic Foundation Library, Leicestershire: This includes a nearly complete collection of the Crescent – a journal and newsletter that includes brief commentary of everyday life at the Liverpool Muslim Institute including reports of marriages, deaths and celebrations at the LMI. The Crescent was invaluable in uncovering evidence of Muslim women’s roles and lives at LMI. This archive also includes a nearly complete collection of The Islamic World, which describes itself as “a monthly record of Islam around the globe” and which was edited by the president of the Liverpool Muslim Institute, W.H. Abdullah Quilliam
- Private papers of Evelyn ‘Zainab’ Cobbold (1867–1963): These are now held in London at the Westminster flat of her great-grandson Angus Sladen. These contain personal letters and other correspondence, artefacts from her life and early editions of her books including the book she wrote on the Hajj or her pilgrimage to Mecca.
- Material linked to wider British Muslim contexts including those related to the London Mosque Fund and East London Mosque Trust Ltd (Ansari 2011) were examined. Publications on the history of British Muslim communities, Lascar sailors and related subjects were identified via academic search engines.

A feminist approach is not without limitations and critique, yet for this research, it provides an analytical framework to re-read and re-interpret archival sources to uncover the roles Muslim women played in these communities. The archival materials that I used have been examined many times, yet women’s stories remained largely untold as mainstream historians largely concentrate on male lives, experiences and achievements (Purvis 1992). Guided by June Purvis’ formative work on feminist history this research on uncovering Muslim women’s histories in Britain involves:

“...challenging stereotypical representation of women mainly as wives and mothers [...] and presenting women as actors in their own right; questioning the concepts and analyses offered in mainstream historical works [...] that are mainly based on lives of men [...]; exploring the power relationships between the sexes whereby women are oppressed and subordinated to men; and lastly, finding the hidden subjective voices and experiences of women so that their own words can speak to us, even though they may be mediated through the discourses of the day (Purvis 1992: 274).”

Through my analysis, I was able to piece together a coherent and compelling narrative of women’s lives, contributions and fields of influence within these nascent British Muslim communities. My research is not without gaps. As detailed in the discussion that follows, I would

often find an impressive female personality for the trail to then 'go cold'. Some sources simply do not exist and where they exist women's voices are often subverted by cultural patriarchies of their time. There are also limitations related to the nature of the content of the archives. Both the journals—'The Islamic and Muslim India' and the 'Islamic Review'—were outward-facing publications, which included discussions about Islam aimed at both Muslim and non-Muslim audiences. Both these contain articles relevant to women, for example around women's rights, women's social roles, marriage, etc. However, other than poetry by women and proclamations by women of accepting Islam, these publications are largely devoid of narratives from everyday life and, therefore, give a sense of how Muslims at the time wanted to represent themselves rather than how they lived. The Crescent however to a certain extent fills this gap by providing a vivid narrative of day-to-day activities within the Liverpool Muslim Institute, including minutes of meetings and records of who attended celebrations and/or prayers at the mosque. Here too there are gaps. For example, there is mention of a 'ladies committee' within the Mosque that met regularly—unfortunately, and rather frustratingly, there is extremely limited evidence relating to the activities of this committee. There is an ongoing need for further research, in the meantime, this article provides glimpses into these women's lives that were shaped both by their Muslim beliefs and their Victorian British sensibilities.

In the presentation of women's lives that follows, I use excerpts from women's and men's writing from that era. For authenticity and to give a sense of the prevailing social milieus, I do not correct grammar or spelling in their writing even where the words that are used appear incorrect or even mildly offensive to modern eyes. So, for example where historical personalities have used 'Moslem' or 'Mahommedan' instead of 'Muslim', I retain their usage. Similarly, I retain a 'ladies committee' and do not change it to 'women's committee'. I refer to the women using the titles that were used to refer to them during their lifetimes, for example, 'Lady' Cobbold, 'Mrs' Keep and 'Madame' Viele.

### **3. Women's Everyday Lives**

Both the Liverpool and Woking archives, and the Crescent, in particular, give valuable insights into the everyday lives of the women in the mosque communities. At both sites, women were included in different ways. They were part of prayers, Eid celebrations, debates and other events. This is obvious from Eid celebration photos and videos from Woking and from lists of attendees at the Eid celebrations in Liverpool (as regularly noted in the Crescent). In the photos of the Woking Eid celebrations, women were at the back; however, there was no physical separation between men and women (which is the norm in most contemporary British mosques), as also noted by Geaves (2010) and Gilham (2014). The photographs also show that a few women and men sat at the back and did not participate in the prayers. This could be because they were not Muslim but were guests who came to observe the prayer and subsequent celebrations. There is a possibility that some of these women may have been in a state of ritual impurity, however, that they are accompanied by men who also did not participate in the prayer suggests that it is more likely that they were guests.



BROTHERHOOD LISTENING TO THE SERMON OF THE IMAM.

**Image 1.** This is a photograph of an Eid prayer from the Woking Mosque sometime between 1914 and 1916. Women are clearly visible both as members of the congregation and as observers. Image courtesy [www.wokingmuslim.org](http://www.wokingmuslim.org)

The Crescent also notes that women attended the Annual General Meetings of the mosque. As discussed later in this article women had roles in mosque-leadership. Lady Fatima Cates, an early convert to Islam, was re-elected many times as the treasurer of the Liverpool Muslim Institute. Mrs Nafisa Keep represented the Liverpool Muslim Institute in external social and political events. I examine both women's lives in more detail later in this article. As noted previously there was also a 'ladies committee', although I have found only limited evidence of its activities.

When the Medina Home for Children was established in Liverpool in January 1897, although men were on its committee, women-led the day-to-day management. The first honorary secretary of the home was Miss Emily Mackay. Women managed the everyday running of the home and collected donations for the children. They organized a weekly sewing circle during which they mended the clothes that were donated for the children. In 1898 when the home was struggling for finance, the ladies committee led a fundraising appeal. The edition of the Crescent dated 30 November 1898, included a plea for funds aimed at the Crescent's international readership that was written by the women of the Liverpool Muslim Institute. This publication demonstrates these women's agency and their commitment to the home. It begins,

"The Ladies' Committee of the Medina Home find it necessary to make an appeal to their brothers and sisters abroad for financial aid in order to enhance the value of the Institution, the objects of which are to afford shelter, sustenance and education to friendless and destitute children, orphans and otherwise, who oft-times are left to the mercy of a cruel and pitiless world."

Women wrote for the Crescent, for the Islamic World (the two Liverpool-based publications) and for the Islamic Review and Muslim World (the Woking-based publication). Women like Mrs Nafeesa Keep and Madame Terese Viele wrote about religion, political affairs and personal moral life—subjects that were usually reserved for men. Women regularly wrote travelogues—most notably Abdullah Quilliam's mother Harriet Khadijah Quilliam-Holehouse who wrote a series in the first volume of the Islamic World (1893) entitled 'From Liverpool to the Black Sea'. The publications also include articles by women who were not Muslim but who provided sympathetic accounts of Islam, Muslim life in Britain and abroad. Women also regularly wrote poetry.

The Crescent and the Islamic Review regularly made note of a number of women (and men) converting to Islam and the Islamic Review includes statements from women (and men) detailing why they chose to convert. There are records of marriages between members of the mosques including mixed-race marriages usually between white female British converts and wealthy Indian and Middle-Eastern men. The Crescent celebrated women's achievement including those who had no connection to their community. For example, in January 1895 it notes that Mrs Zubeida Ali Akbar had the honour of being presented to the Queen and on 20th March 1895 it notes that Miss Teyba Bilgrami, "a young Mahommedan lady of Hyderabad" has passed the first exam in the Arts at Madras University. Notes like these are found at regular intervals throughout the Crescent. So initial explorations suggest that the first two mosques had an egalitarian ethos at least in relation to including women within the mosque space. Yet as we shall discuss later in this article, they marginalized women in other ways.

The two *first* British mosques included women in leadership roles as well as in everyday mosque life. In contemporary times, the inclusion of women in the mosque activities and management remains a contested issue (Nyhagen 2019). Although women in Europe are increasing their participation in mosques (Gilliat-Ray 2010, Shannahan 2014), they are often either barred from mosques or relegated to back rooms (Shannahan 2014). Despite initiatives aimed at including women (for example the Muslim Council of Britain's programme on women's leadership in mosques - <https://mcb.org.uk/project/women-in-mosques-development-programme/>), mosque leadership and mosque spaces remain overwhelmingly male (Gilliat-Ray 2010). Yet this must be understood in the context of the very different cultural and social contexts within which historical and contemporary Muslim communities, and their mosques, are located. Due to patterns of migration in the 1960s and 70s, contemporary British mosques are culturally situated in Islamic traditions from the Indian subcontinent and to a lesser extent from the Middle-East. In the Indian subcontinent, economic considerations have fused with cultural patriarchies to create a religious narrative that limits women's access to the mosque. When Muslims from the Indian subcontinent came to Britain, they brought with them their culture and their religious traditions (Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015). According to a report published in 2017, 28% of mosques in Britain do not offer facilities for women, and up to 50% of all South Asian-run mosques do not accommodate them (MuslimsinBritain 2017).

These Muslim communities of the 1890s that we examine in this article were largely white British communities consisting of middle-class converts who had fairly recently accepted Islam. These communities were also significantly smaller. There were 'foreign gentlemen'—Middle Eastern and South Asian—members of the congregation but they were in a minority and as sailors or travellers, their presence was largely transient. In accounting for their British cultural preferences, these British Muslims were able to find common ground between their Islamic and British values and practices. For example, there was a piano in the mosque that was regularly played at events (music is often banned in contemporary mosques or only instruments that are not string-based or wind are used). Every year the Liverpool Mosque organized a Christmas Breakfast for the poor and destitute of Liverpool, which included free food and entertainment. And the women who attended both the Liverpool Mosque and the Woking Mosque did not usually wear headscarves, but 'dressed as ordinary Englishwomen' (Gilham 2014:95).



**Image 2.** This is a photograph of Jessie Ameena Davidson. Image courtesy [www.wokingmuslim.org](http://www.wokingmuslim.org).

Again bearing in mind their differing social contexts, debates around the women's attire did not take place in the way that they do among contemporary British Muslim communities within which head scarfs, face veils and modest clothing are vested with both religious as well as political meaning (Cheruvallil-Contractor 2012). Women did occasionally wear hijabs and veils, but this was more out of respect for visiting foreign dignitaries than out of religious conviction, as the vignette below demonstrates.

In 1895 *Shehzada* (Crown Prince) Nasrullah Khan of Afghanistan visited England to pay respects to the Queen. As many Muslim rulers at the time did, after visiting the Queen he came to the Liverpool Muslim Institute. This was a big event for all the people of Liverpool who came out in their droves to see the 'foreign prince' and especially so for Liverpool's Muslims who formed the reception committee. The Mayor consulted with Abdullah Quilliam and they decided that as a mark of respect towards the Shehzada, the Muslim men would wear fezes (a Turkish cylindrical felt hat, usually red) and Middle Eastern-style robes and the women would veil themselves. Mrs Nafeesa Keep wrote about this event in the *Crescent*, dated 10 July 1895. She writes that when she spoke to them, she detected a sense among the Liverpool people who had gathered that the Muslim women would be heavily veiled. She continues:

"Much good natured chaff was mingled with the forgoing comment [that the Muslim women would be heavily veiled], meanwhile, we reached the carriage that had been set

apart for the ladies dressing-room. Here we ladies rearranged our veils, but we were not shrouded as the spectators had evidently surmised we should have been; white tulle crossed the brow and covered the head, then the fleecy folds were drawn over the lower part of the face, quite concealing the features but leaving the eyes uncovered. The little girls wore white tulle veils over their faces and retained their picturesque hats.

[...] Several of the spectators who have observed our entrance awaited our regress, and were profuse in exclamations of astonishment at the manner in which the Mohammedans had behaved. I asked, "How did you expect us to behave?" "Well, we thought you'd all rush to the carriage and kiss the Prince's hands and \_\_\_" I let their hesitation subside, when I replied that we are not altogether devoid of common sense and have besides some little knowledge of the amenities of Society, with a great big "S". Several of the interlocutors called to my attention to the newspaper reports of the manner in which the Shahzada had viewed the low-cut gowns of the London ladies: these persons wished to know if our veils were a concession to the Shahzada's prejudices. I told them we wore veils because we were Muslims and that Shaikh Quilliam had consulted with the Lord Mayor"

For Mrs Keep and the other female Muslims, wearing the veil was something that they recognized as appropriate in respect of the Shehzada's cultural sensibilities but not something that they regularly wore. Yet on this occasion, they also wore veils because they were Muslim. Lady Evelyn Cobbold, who is discussed in detail later in this article, was always dressed in high fashion. For the rituals of her Hajj pilgrimage, she wore a veil that covered her completely, yet when she could not bear the heat she removed it.

Notwithstanding the egalitarian attitudes to mosque access and modesty, there were also delineations in what women could and could not do. Women were nearly always in-charge of refreshments at mosque events including the annual Christmas breakfast that the Liverpool Muslim Institute organized. At the Christmas breakfasts, women also organized the entertainment and played the piano. An example of the exclusion of women is them initially not being included of the Literary and Debating society, this being only for 'young men'. Then in March 1896, for the first time, Rosa Warren gave a talk on the poet Longfellow (The Crescent 8 January 1896). Rosa Warren was a longstanding Muslim member of the congregation and her name is often found among the attendees of the Eid prayer. It is interesting that her talk and indeed those of the very small number of other women who spoke at the debating society *never* focussed on issues of Islam, religion or even generally on morality, although men regularly spoke about these subjects.

Given the historical nature of this research and our inability to directly access the voices of women like Rosa Warren, it is difficult to gauge why exactly she did not talk about morality or religion. From feminist historical research into women's lives in this era, we know that this could be an expression of Victorian and Edwardian patriarchal attitudes that silenced women in different ways (Purvis 1992). These attitudes gradually seem to change. In his Eid speech in 1899, the chair of the debating society advised, "all our young men and women to join the debating society, they will find its meetings most interesting" (The Crescent, 15 February 1899). It is important also to point out that at this Eid celebration there was no speech by a woman. Furthermore later on that year when Rosa Warren again addressed the Debating Society on the topic 'Dancing – Ancient and Modern', it was described in the Crescent as, "most interesting and certainly the most amusing lecture of the season" (The Crescent, 2 March 1899). Yet it did not receive any further coverage in the Crescent despite a note saying that it would receive more substantial coverage in the following issue and all other lectures in that season being reproduced verbatim.

Articles written by men and often by Abdullah Quilliam himself seems to indicate the convergence of patriarchies that straddled both Muslim attitudes of that time and Victorian attitudes towards women and their roles in society. Articles supporting polygamy, for example, indicate women's inferiority from a Muslim perspective. Other articles indicate scepticism of 'the New Woman' who is derided and made fun of. According to the Crescent, the New Woman

“...had studied mathematics [...] knew all about mythology [...] her mind was drilled in science [...] knew all the dates of history [...] Could talk with great loquacity on questions of capacity, but couldn't sew a button on her little brother's pants (The Crescent, 30 October 1895).”

Jokes about women are often made in the Crescent and are illustrative of Victorian attitudes to women and extant tensions around women's changing social roles as a result of their demands for equality (Purvis 1995). There was also a benign form of patriarchy that insisted on protecting and/or idealizing women. This is exemplified in the publicity note for the Medina Home for Children. In looking after children who were 'illegitimate' the 'home' sought to give their mothers a chance to recover their lives in the context of a society in England that 'forgives the man any transgression [...] but] remembers a woman's slip'(The Crescent, 6 January 1897). Another example of this benign patriarchy is found in an announcement in the Crescent introducing a day school for girls:

“We understand that it is contemplated to still further extend the usefulness of our Institution by arranging for a girls' school to be also commenced, and that a suitable lady has already been engaged. This is also a wise step. Our girls of to-day will in a few years, be the wives and mothers of a future generation. The great Napoleon truly said “Those who rock the cradle, rule the world. “ and if the mothers are able to teach their children Moslem prayers and Moslem rules of life, from the first moment that the child is able to lisp a sentence, or understand the difference between right and wrong, then the future of Islam in England is assured. We wish the Institutions, both the boys and the girls schools every success in the future (The Crescent, 28 January 1893).”

The suggestion that the main purpose of women's and girls' education is to educate the next generations mirrors contemporary discussions around women's education in Britain and beyond. Danièle Joly describes how the male scholars she spoke to, considered young women and girls to be the “mothers of tomorrow” who would transmit “a proper Muslim way of life and values to children [of generations] to come”. Most scholars agree that there is an emphasis within Islamic texts on the 'special status' of mothers (Cheruvallil-Contractor 2016, p.15). In Muslim communities, this translates to an 'over signification' of motherhood (Cheruvallil-Contractor 2016, p.17) which distinctly contrasts with women's desires to be more than 'just mothers' or 'just females' (Liberatore 2019, p. 13).

For Muslim women living in this era, Muslim attitudes of the time and Victorian attitudes converged to marginalise them so that they were excluded from social roles or were often relegated to producing the 'refreshments' and 'entertainment'. Yet in these environs, there were also women who challenged this convergence of patriarchies. The following sections of this article focus on their stories.

#### 4. Uncovering Significant Female Muslim Personalities

An example of these significant women is Mrs Nafeesa T Keep, an American convert to Islam, the honorary secretary of the American Islamic Propaganda. After disagreements with Alexander Russell Webb (the controversial leader of this early American Muslim community), she decided to move to Liverpool, arriving here on 14 February 1895. She gave a number of lectures including titles such as “An American Woman's views of Islam”, “Women under Islamic Law”, “From the Convent to the Mosque: a personal experience’. The Crescent records some of these events in great detail, providing full texts of the talks and in some cases dates too (The Crescent, multiple volumes, February to June 1895). Her lectures demonstrate a confident woman who was not afraid to share her views about Islam and who challenged Western perceptions of her faith.

“All the privileges which belong to her as a woman and as a wife are secured to her, not by the courtesies that 'come and go', but by the actual text in the book of law [...] The whole history of Muhammedan legislation is a standing rebuke to those who consider that the position of women under Islamic laws is one of exceptional severity (Keep 1895).”

Mrs Keep nearly always took a stance that defended Islam, but which also insisted on a need to uphold the rights of women as outlined in the foundational Muslim texts. In many ways, Mrs Keep and her campaigning is similar to that of contemporary religious feminist voices emerging from British and Western Muslim communities who seek to strike a similar balance and challenge dichotomies in the representation of women (Cheruvallil-Contractor 2012, Liberatore 2019). Similar to many contemporary European Muslim women, Mrs Keep sought to position herself as an ambassador of her faith (van Es 2019). Mrs Keep continued to live and contribute to the work of the Liverpool Muslim Institute for a few months and she was appointed the assistant superintendent of the *Medressah-i-iyyum-al-Sebbah* an institution aimed at educating young Muslims on the foundations of their religion (The Crescent, 22 May 1895). In May 1895 she was present at a conference of Muslims held “under the auspices of the London Anjuman-i-Islam” (The Crescent, 22 May 1895). She attended another event organised to “give expression to public sentiment upon the alleged Armenian atrocities” and spoke at this event as a representative of the Liverpool Muslim Institute (The Crescent, 29<sup>th</sup> May 1895). She also continued to be present for Eid celebrations for a year but after this, no mention of her is found. Singleton notes that she never returned to America (2007). It is unfortunate that the Crescent does not contain further information; however, this is an area for further research.

Another significant woman whose stories were uncovered includes Madame Teresa Griffin Viele (1831–1906) who took the Muslim name Sadika Hanoum and wrote for the Islamic World and for the Crescent. She seems to have acted like a news correspondent writing the “Resume of Political Events” in the Islamic World from September 1894 to April 1895. She was planning to translate one of Quilliam’s publications into French, although it is not clear if this project was ever completed – that it only ever appeared as ‘in press’ in the Crescent’s advertising pages seems to indicate that it was not completed. In January 1893 the Crescent notes that she was suffering from influenza, although she later recovered. In July 1893 she addressed the World’s Congress Auxiliary in Chicago on ‘the Women of Turkey’. She too disappears from the pages of the Crescent and the Islamic World and more research is needed to uncover her life.

Other women in this community include Fatima Cates, who was one of the earliest converts, longstanding member and founding treasurer of the Liverpool Muslim Institute. It is significant that a woman was so central to the formation of the Liverpool Muslim Institute and ultimately Britain’s first mosque. When considered with the fact that a woman, Begum Shah Jahan of Bhopal (in modern India), funded Britain’s first purpose-built mosque in Woking, this retelling of history puts women at the centre of the establishment of Islam in Britain. It is also unfortunate that the leading roles of both these women have been all but forgotten. The Crescent notes Fatima Cates’ death on 27<sup>th</sup> October 1901 with great sadness:

“Some ten days prior to her demise she contracted a severe cold, and on Wednesday, October 24, was too ill to leave her bedroom. At the time it was not contemplated anything was seriously the matter with her beyond an attack of influenza. [...] On the Monday morning, however, acute pneumonia supervened, and at three o’clock the doctor pronounced that there was no hope. Telephonic message was at once sent to the Sheikh-ul-Islam, who proceeded to the house. Sister Cates was perfectly conscious, and expressed to him her wish to be buried as a Muslim, as she would die in the Faith she had embraced, and further desired him to conduct the funeral service over her grave, and to be guardian to her little boy. Half an hour later she expired.

A few moments before she died our sister raised the index finger of her right hand, and slowly, but clearly, repeated the Kaleema in Arabic, then, putting her hand in that of the Sheikh, she smiled a sweet smile, and said, ‘Good-bye; it is all over,’ and without a struggle peacefully yielded up her breath.”

There are increasing signs of young British Muslim’s interest in these early British communities and their recognition of the significance of the historical contributions of men *and* women. In memory of Fatima Cates’ and as an example of her enduring legacy, a second-generation Islamic scholar set up the Fatima Elizabeth Cates Phrontistery (or institute of

learning) in London as an Islamic educational institution: <https://www.fatimaelizabethphrontistery.co.uk/>.

This section on significant female personalities is incomplete without mention of Lady Evelyn Zainab Cobbold, a high-profile convert from an aristocratic British family. She became one of the first European women to perform the Hajj or pilgrimage to Mecca. Extraordinarily for her time she performed the pilgrimage on her own, in a motor car and then wrote a best-selling book in 1934 about her experiences. Cobbold sought the help of a Saudi theologian in writing the book whose role seems to have been to ensure that the religious facts were correct. Within the book, it is obvious what sections have been written by Cobbold – these are personal and thought-provoking, the sections by the theologian are often formulaic and lacking in personality. Lady Cobbold opens the book with the statement:

“I am often asked when and why I became a Moslem. I can only reply that I do not know the precise moment when the truth of Islam dawned on me. It seems that I have always been a Muslim (Cobbold 2009, p. 89).”

In writing about her journey to Arafat (one of the stages of the Hajj pilgrimage) Cobbold describes a moment that is humorous yet also underpinned by poignant insight into how she as an aristocratic white British woman perceived her Muslimness and negotiated her identity with other Muslims:

“I had brought an English book with me on my pilgrimage, knowing our progress must be slow in that great procession. The book was *Passages from Arabia Deserta* by that mighty traveler Doughty, and during a stop I opened it and from under my veil I was soon absorbed in reading, when a voice from a neighboring car asked: “Is that an Arabic book? Suleiman [her driver and guide] answered quickly that of course it was Arabic, and whispered to me to close the book, which I refused to do. Again the voice spoke: “Can you swear by all we hold holy, is it Arabic and a book for the Moslems?” Before the alarmed Suleiman could answer I turned and held the book out to the anxious enquirer saying: “This is an English book and I am an English Moslem and I am here on pilgrimage by permission of the King.” After a few seconds of astonished silence he returned the book to me saying “Alhamdullilah!” (Praise be to God) (Cobbold 2009, p. 245)”

The above narrative from Cobbold demonstrates her sense of identity as an English Muslim woman. She is not alarmed by the enquirer, instead, she describes him as anxious. The intersectional aspects of her identity come into play as she co-opts authority through her own aristocratic heritage and through her networks, most notably the Saudi King!

In their own different ways, these women took on roles of leadership and representation. They negotiated their representativeness at different levels within the social hierarchies that they inhabited. Madame Viele represented her way of believing and practising Islam to global audiences at the World Congress in Chicago. Mrs Keep built local bridges with her neighbours in Liverpool, exemplified in her conversations during the Shehzada of Afghanistan’s visit. Lady Cobbold translated cultures when she spoke about her positionality to a Muslim, albeit one from a different culture. Lady Cates contributed to the establishment of her mosque and remained until her death a committed member of its community. These vignettes present the briefest of glimpses into these women’s lives and the myriad ways in which during their lives they influenced discourses around Islam. It is imperative that these women’s stories of leadership, representation and negotiation are included within historical constructs of British Islam so that their contributions are recognized.

## 5. Conclusions

Women’s contributions are consistently forgotten, lost from the annals of history which perhaps then becomes almost exclusively ‘his story’. The research that underpins this article attempts to redress this imbalance in the context of British Muslim history. This article answers the questions: who were the women who lived in these communities? What were their roles in society and how can

we learn from them? As we are introduced to Britain's first Muslimahs it is important to note that these are a few stories and a lot more research needs to be undertaken to ensure that women's voices are adequately heard in the annals of history.

These women lived in contexts that socially and culturally were extremely different from the contexts that contemporary British Muslims inhabit. Yet these women's lives, their practice of Islam and their negotiations with multiple patriarchies are not dissimilar to the debates around gender in contemporary British societies. By shining a light on the history of Muslim women in Britain we make contemporary issues seem less insurmountable. These women helped shape the Muslim communities of their time and it is imperative that their stories are known.

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