



Always the bitter word

It is fascinating to see the attitudes towards women working in banks over the past 100 years. Here are some nuggets gleaned from the history books.

1920s: Letter from a bank official A.H. Reid

He lamented the continued employment of 'girls' by banks, saying that although they had helped the banks to carry on functioning during the war, their employment was now having 'a detrimental effect on our banks'. Reid claimed that 'girls' spent too long talking on the telephone, were usually inefficient, and were unable to keep business books as they did not write in the appropriate columns. More than that, their general attitude was unsuited to the banking environment as if a 'girl' was spoken to firmly at work, 'she uses the greatest of all weapons against man, "tears"'. On top of that, wrote Reid, 'there is absolutely no doubt that girls cannot work as well together as men. Two men may have a quarrel and yet work side by side without the work suffering, could two girls do likewise? And, all the while, their desire to get married hinders the bank: A man, the longer he is in the bank the greater is his interest in its prosperity. The average girl, and rightly so, hopes every year that it will be her last within its walls.'

This letter prompted a swift response from a defender of the 'girls'/'lady clerks', a sub-agent of the Bank of Ireland who condemned A.H. Reid's sentiments as 'untrue and unjust'. His conclusion is a brilliant example of how to pretend to be a defender and supporter of a minority and then stab them in the back!

"I do not consider them in any way inferior.....This alleged chattering of women is all nonsense. My experience in banking is that men gossip more and waste more valuable time in futile chatter than any woman.....They can tot just as well as most men, and their handwriting and work is generally far neater than that of the average man.....Women work as hard as men. I have never seen them in tears or near it. They are just as polite to clients as men are, and in every way just as keen, if not keener, on their work as their male colleagues on theirs, and with less incentive..... I do not consider them in any way inferior – on the contrary – but I do consider that for them bank work is unsuitable."