Welcome, Delighted to open this event.

Warmest thanks, and congratulations, to Charlotte Potter and her team of fellow students for organizing this event, and to our speakers for giving up their time today.

My themes today are:

to remind you of the women who have gone before us,
to argue that the pace of change is accelerating, and
to suggest that we reflect on the world we would want to create when all ceilings have been shattered.

The University of St Andrews, for much of its history, was not at the forefront of women’s education. Many of you have probably been to MUSA and seen the sign taken from the rule book which said that:

“We will not have any woman set foot in our place, save the common laundress, who must be fifty years at the least, because saith Jerome, he cannot abide with God who is not free from the approaches of women”.

To be fair, the university was reflecting the cultural mores of the time. Nevertheless, it took over 480 years before the first woman, Agnes Blackadder, graduated from the university in 1895.

She was not the first woman to matriculate. Elizabeth Garrett (subsequently to become the first qualified female doctor in Britain) managed to matriculate in 1862 and thereby cause an uproar. Once they discovered what had happened, the Senate squashed her matriculation, her signature was scored out of the matriculation register, and entrance to the university denied. She went on to study at home in London and gained an MD from the University of Paris.

The University did make overtures to the education of women by establishing in 1877 a distance learning program for women. It was called LLA or Lady Literate in Arts, (It didn’t sound as bad then as it does now.) This allowed women to obtain the benefits of a university education without the complexities involved in their actually mixing with males on campus. The scheme was enormously popular and 28,000 women took modules and over 5,000 completed the full course.

While St Andrews may have been slow in allowing women to become full members of the university, it took Oxbridge much longer, 1920 in the case of Oxford and 1947 in the case of Cambridge.
Once permitted women came to St Andrews in large numbers. Five years after women were admitted they constituted one third of the matriculating class. In fact, during the First World War, there were more female than male students here. The story goes that when Rudyard Kipling was elected Rector so many of the participants in the drag were female that the Principle of the day worried that St Andrews would be seen as a girls university and ordered the reconstitution of the all-male Kate Kennedy Club and the exclusion of girls from the photos of the following Rectoral drags.

The first female professor in Scotland, Margaret Fairlie was appointed to the Chair in Obstetrics and Gynaecology in 1940 in St Andrews. On the one hand this was a singular achievement, on the other hand it wasn’t so good, as she should have been appointed in four years earlier when she became Head of Department. Principle Irvine, however, was reluctant to appoint a woman to a chair. It took four years of pressure from Fairlie, backed by the Directors of the Dundee Royal Infirmary, before she got her chair. It took 52 years for the university to appoint its second female professor. Ursula Martin was appointed to the Chair in Computational Science in 1992. 23 years later we have 36 female professors.

Today, 60% of our undergraduates, 40% of our lecturers and senior lecturers, 20% of our professors are female. Now that’s progress. It’s not where we need to be, but it is progress. (There are still interesting differences: 87% of the undergraduates studying Art History here are female. 79% of the undergraduates studying Computer Science are male.)

The pace of change is accelerating:

It took almost 500 years to admit the first female students

It took 550 years to appoint the first female professor

It took 600 years to appoint the first female principal

It has taken me 6 years to appoint the first gender balanced Principal’s Office

As we think about continuing difficulties we face as woman we should never forget the women who have gone before us and faced far greater difficulties. We should delight in the progress we have made, even if it isn’t yet enough.

I hope I’m not the only fan of Shondra Rhimes the (Hollywood director, producer and screenwriter) in the room. Last December she received the Hollywood Reporter Sherry Lansing Award for breaking through the industry’s glass ceiling. She gave a wonderful speech, I commend it to you. In it she said:

Making it through the glass ceiling to the other side was simply a matter of running on a path created by every other woman’s footprints.

To illustrate the point she said:

“Look around this room. It’s filled with women of all colors in Hollywood who are executives and heads of studios and VPs and show creators and directors. There are a lot of women in Hollywood in this room who have the game-changing ability to say yes or no to something.
15 years ago, that would not have been as true. There’d have been maybe a few women in Hollywood who could say yes or no. And a lot of D girls and assistants who were gritting their teeth and working really hard. And for someone like me, if I was very very VERY lucky, there’d have been maybe one small show. One small shot. And that shot would not have involved a leading actress of color, any three dimensional LGBT characters, any women characters with high powered jobs AND families, and no more than two characters of color in any scene at one time — because that only happened in sitcoms.

30 years ago, I’d think maybe there’d be a thousand secretaries fending off their handsy bosses back at the office and about two women in Hollywood in this room. And if I were here, I would serving those two women breakfast.

50 years ago, if women wanted to gather in a room, well it had better be about babies or charity work. And the brown women were in one room over there and the white women were in a room over here.

From then to now...we’ve all made such an incredible leap.

Think of all of them.”

There remains a great deal to be done: the fact that only 20% of our professors are female, that 17% of British Vice Chancellors are female, and that only one Russell Group University is led by a woman, means that universities have a ways to go. Beyond universities only 23% of Westminster MPs are female and, after years of agitation and pressure, FUTSI 100 companies have now got 23.5% of women on their boards. The FUTSI 250 have 18%. The number of all male boards among FUTSI 250 companies has dropped from a staggering 151 in 2011 to 23 today. Progress is being made, the pace of change is accelerating, and there is much that needs to be done.

The next question, of course, is what happens when women reach parity in all these fields? Will things be different? How will they be different? Should they be different? As the work of Economists Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz has shown, women have been benefiting from elite education in large numbers since the 1970s and yet those numbers are not reflected at the top. Most professions look like a pyramid. This could be because of discrimination but it surely has a lot to do with the choices women have made. Will women who find themselves in large numbers at the top of organizations act differently than men? That is the question for you, for our students, for the next generation. I hope in the course of this afternoon you pick up some ideas about how things might be done differently and better so that your daughters will come to you one day and ask “What is a glass ceiling?”

Louise Richardson