

# CLARA COLLET

1860–1948

An Educated Working Woman



Deborah McDonald

Foreword by Joan Ruddock MP

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*Deborah McDonald*



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## Foreword

By any definition Clara Collet was a feminist—yet I doubt she would have accepted the description. Throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth, she advocated for the rights of women. Her own life was a powerful example. But she was not a political activist in the classic sense. Her contribution to the advancement of women was rooted in an unusual discipline—statistics.

Clara Collet's ability to earn a living and live an independent life stemmed from her education. Her Unitarian father was Director of Music at the South Place Chapel—a meeting place for radical thinkers. Annie Besant, William Morris, George Bernard Shaw and Sidney Webb debated there. Mr Collet also edited a foreign policy review and Karl Marx's contribution to this paper led to an important friendship between Clara Collet and Eleanor Marx.

Thus Clara grew up in an environment of intellectual discipline in which people were encouraged to think for themselves and question conventions. At the age of twelve she was sent to the North London Collegiate School, a new and radical institution for the education of young women.

Clara Collet was strongly influenced by her women teachers. According to Clara, the Headmistress Miss Buss gave them 'unrivalled opportunities of seeing and listening to every man and woman who was doing anything for the advancement of women's education'. One significant advance was the admission of women to London University in 1878. It was perfect timing for Clara. With help from Miss Buss she was able to secure a teaching post in Leicester, a salary and permission to study for a BA degree. Clara was not yet eighteen but she made the transition to a new city and (without training) to a full-time job as a teacher.

Clara obtained her BA in 1850 and went on to gain the newly instituted London University's teacher's diploma. But despite her success she tired of teaching. Her detailed diary from this period records her need to be admired, periods of self doubt and an interest in men. At a time when marriages of convenience were common, Clara was determined to marry only for love and probably only then, if she could have a career as well. After seven years in Leicester she had decided against marriage for financial security, and teaching as a career. She gambled on seeking a new career in London and taking a master's degree.

Clara's return coincided with shocking revelations of conditions in the East End of London. She joined the Charity Organisation Society. Her philanthropic work with the COS set the pattern for her subsequent career as a leading economist and statistician of women's employment. Within a year she became the first woman to gain an MA in political economy. She joined innumerable societies which brought her to the attention of many of the eminent men of her generation. In 1888 Charles Booth asked her to join his team of investigators into poverty in the East End. She went to live there for three months, documenting the working conditions of women. Her experiences led her to

support trade union membership and advocate a minimum wage—both ground-breaking concepts in the late nineteenth century

Clara's gamble paid off. In 1892 she was employed as an Assistant Commissioner compiling evidence for the Royal Commission of Labour on the Employment of Women. This led directly to her appointment as a Labour Correspondent in the newly created Labour Department of the Board of Trade. Clara thus became the first woman to hold a significant post in the civil service.

Clara Collet was now confident and financially secure with a large circle of friends and varied interests. The latter led her to the novels of George Gissing, who became the most important person in her life. It is likely she may have hoped for romance, but he was married and when he did become free he fell in love with someone else. Nonetheless Clara devoted herself to him and his work, undertook responsibility for his two children after his death and maintained a life-long friendship with the woman he loved.

Her career in the civil service went from strength to strength. She employed bright women and was at pains to ensure that women's interests were always on the agenda. She must have been a considerable influence for change, working with Churchill, Ramsey MacDonald and William Beveridge.

Clara Collet left a diary and letters that she knew would be read, but destroyed much that might have given us a further insight into her feelings. This well-researched book is based on her own records and other primary sources written by friends and colleagues. Many important papers have been discovered by the author and are now indexed into the extensive bibliography and available for students of the history of this period.

Joan Ruddock MP  
House of Commons  
September 2003

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I hope not to have left out anyone pivotal to this book, although I fear I may have done so, as so many people were helpful. If that is the case may I add my thanks now? I must also add that despite all the wonderful help received, any errors are my own.

Finally, I must thank Clara Collet, who enthused me to write the story of her life. I hope I have done her justice and at last placed her amongst those inspirational women who have helped to change the course of history and that my work will encourage others both to use her own vast bibliography to study Victorian/ Edwardian women's work and to write further versions of her life.

‘But...’, the girl hesitated... ‘don’t you approve of any one marrying?’

‘Oh, I’m not so severe! But do you know that there are half a million more women than men in this happy country of ours?’

‘Half a million!’

Her naive alarm again excited Rhoda to laughter.

‘Something like that, they say. So many odd women—no making a pair with them. The pessimists call them useless, lost, futile lives. I naturally—being one of them myself—take another view. I look upon them as a great reserve. When one woman vanishes in matrimony, the reserve offers a substitute for the world’s work. True, they are not all trained yet—far from it. I want to help in that—to train the reserve.’

*The Odd Women*, George Gissing (1893).

Are girls worth educating? Apparently not, as their parents do not think them worth paying for. The expectation that marriage will in a few years after the girl leaves school solve all difficulties and provide for her is at the root of all the confusion... If only the relatives of these girls could realise that at least one-half of them will never be married...that there is no means of predicting which of them will be married, and that any of them may have to support... them-selves all their lives.

‘The Prospects of Marriage for Women’, in *Educated Working Women*, Clara E.Collet (1902).

# Introduction

For any historian studying women's work and the 'sweated trades' during the late Victorian and early Edwardian era, Clara Collet's work provides much interesting and relevant background information.

Almost an exact contemporary of Beatrice Webb (née Potter), about whom an inordinate amount has been written, Clara's life has largely been ignored. Partly as a result of Beatrice's husband, the MP Sidney Webb, partly because of the publication of her voluminous diary, and partly as a result of the legacy of coming from a wealthy and famous family, Beatrice Webb became and has remained well-known.

Clara Collet's success was of her own making. She made no famous marriage; indeed she did not marry. She too wrote a diary, less detailed than Webb's, but fascinating nonetheless. It remains unpublished. She was born into a middle-class family with a comfortable but far from grand income. There was always an expectation that she would have to earn her own living, or marry, as her father was not able to provide financially for the future of his five children.

Yet Clara was no less a success as a social investigator and reformer than her more famous acquaintance. Her peers considered her work superior to Webb's as do present-day researchers. The influence she had on social and economic policy was as great if not greater than Beatrice Webb's. As a Civil Servant she was responsible for advising Cabinet Ministers on matters concerning women's work and in the process influenced them to introduce reforms for the benefit of women and the poor.

Her life was as interesting as Beatrice's, and although her diary is shorter and less complete than that of her acquaintance, it is as full of famous names and interesting anecdotes. No full-length biography of Clara has previously been attempted. This book aims to fill that gap.

Using her diary, her ten years' correspondence with the author George Gissing, his diary, the numerous published articles penned by her and the letters sent to her by other correspondents, it is possible to reconstruct the fascinating life of a middle class, working woman, reflecting on the problems women still had to overcome at the turn of the century and on the improvements already made.

Clara Collet's working life began in 1878 as a school mistress, the most common occupation for a single, educated woman in Victorian Britain, but she was not content with this profession. After completing seven years as a teacher, she left to take an MA degree at University College, London, one of the few universities to offer degrees to women at the time. On the successful completion of her studies, and after a period spent working for Charles Booth, collecting statistics for his project on the extent of poverty in London, Clara made a mid-career move and commenced work in the Civil Service. Despite this institution still being a bastion of male domination, within a few years she was promoted to Senior Investigator in the Labour Department and worked with Lloyd George, Winston Churchill, William Beveridge and James Ramsay MacDonald. Clara's area of expertise in the Board of Trade was all aspects of women's work, education and

training. By the time she reached retirement age she was ‘the principal authority on women’s occupations’<sup>1</sup> in Britain, influencing policy and decision-making within parliament.

Acquaintances and friends outside her work included Karl Marx and Eleanor, his daughter, whom she had befriended during their childhood; Charles Booth with whom she had collaborated, collecting statistics for his great explorative work *The Life and Labour of the People of London*; Beatrice Webb during their mutual work with Booth and later sitting on various committees; and lastly, but most importantly, the man with whom she enjoyed the closest of friendships, the Victorian novelist George Gissing. After Gissing’s early death she had a ‘war of words’ with H.G.Wells, fighting to uphold Gissing’s reputation.

In England at the end of the nineteenth century there was a surplus of women over men. These ‘Odd Women’, to use the title Gissing gave to a novel he had written on the subject prior to meeting Clara, were generally not given much opportunity to develop their skills in order to become gainfully employed even in the few areas in which women were traditionally allowed to participate. The limitations that this imposed resulted in hardship and problems for the women involved. Clara broke with convention to make a career for herself in the traditionally male sphere of the Civil Service. She possessed a sharp intellect and a strong personality, and these attributes, along with the cultural changes taking place at the end of the nineteenth century allowed her to overcome many of the obstacles facing women at this time and achieve the position she did. Despite the demands of work she found the time and energy to pursue a varied and full social life, and participated actively in the numerous societies of which she was a member.

This is the story of Clara Collet, illuminating the changing times in which she lived, highlighting the ‘Woman Question’ and illustrating the situation faced by a middle-class woman worried about making a living, yet at the same time showing how a woman with courage and intelligence was able to succeed in the public sphere, hitherto rarely open to women.

#### NOTE

1. A.L.Bowley, ‘Obituary: Clara E.Collet (September 10, 1860–August 3, 1948)’, *Economic Journal*, Vol. 60 (June 1950), p. 408.

Part I  
Childhood 1860–78



# 1

## Of Humble Origins

It was hardly into a life of poverty that Clara Collet was born on 10 September 1860, yet nor was it into a life of luxury. The family home was at Sunny Bank, Maryleville Road, Hornsey Lane, Islington; a road of mixed character with poor families living intermingled with more middle-class families like the Collet family. Women worked at the ‘numerous laundries round about’<sup>1</sup> and Collet Dobson Collet, Clara’s father, was considering purchasing a small laundry himself to supplement his income as a teacher of singing and editor of the non-profit-making journal, the *Free Press*. The neighbours were of widely differing occupations varying from labourers to stockbrokers, and from farm workers to bank clerks.<sup>2</sup> Despite the obvious poverty of some of the occupants, the road was in a pleasant elevated location with views overlooking the surrounding environs and, on a clear day, central London. Yet it was far enough away from the city to ensure the avoidance of the worst of the fogs, the stench of the sewage-filled Thames and the moral and physical dangers of the street people populating all but the better areas of the capital. It was close enough to enable easy access to the Crouch End railway station on the Great Northern Railway line which was less than five minutes walk away. The other advantage was that Hornsey Lane, being close to Highgate provided a useful source of middle- and upper-class clients able and willing to pay for Mr Collet’s singing lessons.

Clara Elizabeth Collet was the fourth child to be born to the Collets; her siblings were Caroline Mary, known as Carrie, who was 5 years old; Wilfred aged 3, and little Harold who at 2 was himself still a toddler. When Clara was 2 years old the final member of the family, Edith Sophia, was born.

Collet Dobson Collet had started life as Collet Dobson but along with Sophia, one of his sisters, he decided to reclaim the old family name of Collet which had been lost due to matrilineal descent some generations earlier. Mr Collet was ‘a musician of distinction’ and ‘an acknowledged authority on musical matters’.<sup>3</sup> In addition to teaching singing he was the choir director at Finsbury Chapel and later the musical director of the South Place Chapel. Not only was the South Place Chapel a centre for nonconformist worship, it was also a meeting place for radical thinkers to share ideas and ideologies. Those who made contributions at debates held at the Chapel included Annie Besant, T.H.Huxley, William Morris, George Bernard Shaw, Bertrand Russell, Leslie Stephen, Graham Wallas, Sidney Webb, Rebecca West and later Mr Collet’s daughter, Clara. George Gissing sometimes attended these debates.

Collet Dobson Collet had, four years before Clara’s birth, taken over the editorship of the radical monthly journal known as the *Free Press*. This journal had originated several years earlier as the *Sheffield Free Press*, a mouthpiece for the views of David Urquhart, the founder of the Working Men’s Foreign Affairs Committee. In 1856 the journal moved to London when Collet began his long association as editor and manager. He did not like

the title so renamed the paper, *The Free Press: A Diplomatic Review*. The *Free Press* had been known as a journal without principles and with no predetermined views. In its new form its ideology was to remain the same and the editorial commented that,

*The Free Press* then is the reverse of all other journals. It deals with each case on its own merits. It has neither opinions on ‘politics’ nor predilections for men. Its only maxim is that ‘The State can be monitored only by the highest justice.’... We have added to our title a second and an explanatory one. *Free Press* is not only unmeaning, but absurd... *Diplomatic Review* is a term which defines a large portion of our contents, without excluding the remainder.<sup>4</sup>

and so in 1866 the *Diplomatic Review* was born.

The journal was a repository for comment on foreign policy. Although designed originally to be read by working men to correspond with Mr Urquhart’s ideology, it was actually subscribed to mainly by ‘the diplomatic and political classes’. The circulation was small and it ran at a loss. Mr Collet can hardly have made much of a living from this area of work and from time to time had to invest money of his own into the journal to keep it running. He continued his singing lessons and did open the small laundry business, which he ran, with the help of his wife, Jane, to supplement their income. Laundries were rate-aided in order to make them inexpensive enough to enable the poor to be able to take advantage of their services. This subsidy was an attempt by the government to clean up London in order to reduce diseases such as cholera, the last serious outbreak of which had been in 1866–67 when Clara was aged 7.

By the time Mr Collet made the application for his daughter’s secondary schooling in 1872, he stated that he was ‘formerly’ editor of the *Diplomatic Review*, yet his name continued to appear until 1877, after which time the journal ceased altogether. In 1876 the editorial column mentioned the paper’s financial difficulties. One measure considered necessary was an increase in the price, although the promise was made that it would still be sold cheaply to working men belonging to committees. In addition the journal’s offices had moved to cheaper premises. Clara wrote that her father ‘resigned the salary of editorship, retaining the responsibilities’,<sup>5</sup> so presumably he was trying to prevent the paper from folding by drawing no salary. He was to continue with his singing lessons and running the laundry for his future income.

The ancestral family had been wealthy. Clara Collet’s interest in genealogy during her retirement years resulted in records being made and books written which documented the family history back to the sixteenth century.

The family background was one of unorthodox religion, merchant pursuits and adventurous characters. By the time Clara was born, the family, although of respectable middle-class origins, was by no means wealthy. Her father, with his radical Unitarian beliefs, was keen to provide an education for his daughters and there was an expectation that all the family would work for a living.

During his association with the *Diplomatic Review*, Mr Collet met many eminent people, who subsequently became known to his children. Frederic Le Play, the French political economist, John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx all contributed to the journal and it was as a result of this latter collaboration that the young Clara made her first close friend.

Karl Marx' youngest and favourite daughter, Eleanor, nicknamed Tussy (to rhyme with Pussy), was five years older than Clara. Both girls came from unorthodox family backgrounds. Marx had been living in virtual poverty whilst compiling his great works on communism and class. Had it not been for his friend Friedrich Engels' financial assistance he would certainly have become destitute. Engels had accumulated considerable wealth from his manufacturing pursuits in Manchester.

Tussy's early childhood was spent in two rooms in Dean Street, Soho shared with up to eight other family members. A description of the accommodation given by a visitor paints a very bleak picture, There is not one clean or decent piece of furniture in either room, but everything is tattered and torn, with thick dust over everything and the greatest untidiness everywhere.<sup>6</sup> It was under these conditions that Marx had to write, on the large table covered with his children's toys, sewing, old crockery, his own pipes, tobacco and ashtrays whilst sharing with seven other family members and the housekeeper who had been with the family for many years. It is a miracle that Marx managed to work at all and it must have required great determination. It is no wonder that from 1857, Marx chose to escape the chaos of home, to work at the newly constructed circular reading-room at the British Museum [Library] whenever he was able.

The Marx family had to endure these poor living conditions for eight years but Tussy was only born towards the end of this period. In 1855, the year of her birth, the family inherited some money from Mrs Marx' uncle in Germany and the following year from her mother also. This enabled the family to move to 9, Grafton Terrace, Kentish Town, a better area and more spacious accommodation. The family lived there for seven and a half years but the inheritance was soon spent and the family were once again living in poverty, albeit in several rooms rather than only two. Mrs Marx found the hardship difficult to withstand and she became frail and unwell. Marx spent his days immersed in work but the continued reliance on Engels for financial assistance was becoming an embarrassment. It is probable that Marx hid the requests for money from the children and especially from Eleanor, the youngest.

Mrs Marx was pleased when Tussy's elder sister, Laura, became engaged to Paul Lafargue. Lafargue's family was of the bourgeois class which Marx condemned, being owners of plantations and property in Santiago and Bordeaux, the proceeds of which were expected to pass to him. However, their son was interested in the new revolutionary politics which gave him something in common with his prospective father-in-law.

[When] the daughter of an 'eminent and aristocratic family of their acquaintance', the Cunninghams, did Jenny and Laura the honour of inviting them to be the sole bridesmaids at her wedding, Mrs Marx was so overcome by this honour that it was all she could do to collect her wits and what little money that could be scraped together to buy the girls, 'bonnets, cloaks and heaven knows what else', for the occasion.<sup>7</sup>

Nothing was denied the girls despite their poverty. Mrs Marx did not try to shield her girls from the bourgeoisie so disliked by her husband.

In 1864 another double legacy came the way of the family saving them once again from their financial reliance upon Engels. This enabled the Marx family to move to 1, Modena Villas (renamed 1, Maitland Park Road in 1868), in Maitland Park, another

improvement in both the size and location of their house. The family lived here for 11 years and it was here, when Tussy was 13 years old and Clara 8, that the two girls first met although the date of this meeting is uncertain. Clara later claimed that it was in the summer of 1869<sup>8</sup> that the meeting took place, but Eleanor spent from May to October of that year with Friedrich Engels in Manchester. She had been writing from memory in 1944 when recounting this occasion and may have been mistaken as to the exact date. It could have been early autumn as, ‘At last, on 12 October (1869) Eleanor came back to London in time for a brief family reunion.’<sup>9</sup> It is unlikely to have been the previous year as Eleanor was ill with scarlet fever in June and left to convalesce in Ramsgate for most of August, although they may have met just before she left or after she returned. However, the following year seems more likely. Caroline and Wilfred had been sent to Calais to learn French in 1870 but they had been forced to return in July due to the civil war in France. Apart from a brief trip to Ramsgate in August, Eleanor was in London for most of the summer, in which case she would have been 14 and Clara 9 when they first met, and the year 1870.

Clara had not endured anything like the financial hardship of her friend during her childhood, but her family were not wealthy. Both she and Tussy had fathers who mixed with radicals. Their unorthodox connections set them apart from other more socially conventional families. The Collets’ nonconformist faith and the Marx’ foreignness further increased this gap between the two families and their contemporaries. It was their families’ differences from others which drew the girls together.

Unlike Eleanor, who had a good relationship with her parents, at least during her childhood, Clara commented years later, ‘I wonder if I should have been worse if I had been happy and understood when I was a child; probably not better.’<sup>10</sup> The girls were both highly intelligent and helped their fathers with their work. In the autumn of 1869 Eleanor first began to help Marx—helping him in clearing out his study. Throughout her life Eleanor supported both her father’s work and ideals. In 1873–75 Clara earned her pocket money of 6d by helping her father, ‘pasting or inserting into guard books and indexing the letters received by [him] in connection with the editorship of the monthly *Diplomatic Review*’.<sup>11</sup> She did this work in her father’s study, thus enabling father and daughter to spend time together as they worked.

With their families’ unorthodox lifestyles the girls had much in common and few other friends. The friendship grew. On Clara’s side there may have been an element of hero worship as Tussy was her senior. She was in awe of Eleanor’s appearance and describes her at the time of their first meeting as wearing a ‘frock of blue merino trimmed with white swan’s down’ and says that she ‘won her heart’.<sup>12</sup> The occasion was a Shakespeare reading session at the Collet family home in Hornsey Lane, which involved her family, Mrs Marx, Eleanor, Laura and Jenny Marx, and an actress friend of the Collets named Theresa Furtado. Karl Marx was not present at this event. Whilst the older members of the entourage were engaged in the serious business of reading the play, Eleanor spent her time upstairs with the children, including Clara, and the friendship began. From Clara’s description, the youngsters had no qualms about which rooms they used. They went up to the ‘fair sized landing opening into surrounding rooms, into all of which we gave ourselves admission’.<sup>13</sup>

She may have been in awe of Tussy’s beauty but Clara was not unattractive herself. She was petite, with dainty features with slightly hooded eyelids, full lips and a high

forehead. In a photograph taken of her, aged 30, her hair was pulled severely back from her forehead and fixed at the neck in a sensible plaited bun. Conversely Eleanor had what every Victorian girl wished for; thick naturally curly hair which she wore loosely around her face and caught gently at the back allowing it to tumble down over her shoulders. She had a large nose about which she once jokingly wrote, 'I, unfortunately only inherited my father's nose—I used to tell him I could sue him for damages as his nose had distinctly entailed a loss on me), and not his genius.'<sup>14</sup> Her eyes were not symmetrical. Clara, like others, did not notice her new friend's faults. Eleanor's ebullient personality made up for her lack of natural beauty giving the impression to the younger girl that the elder was perfect in every way. A description of the young Eleanor given by a contemporary noted that she was, 'Not really beautiful, but she somehow gave the impression of beauty by reason of her sparkling eyes, her bright colouring, her dark locky masses of hair.'<sup>15</sup>

Although her diary does not begin until her sixteenth year, Clara made mention of her early years in articles she wrote later. In addition much can be conjectured. Her mother does not feature largely in her life at any time and with her comment on her unhappy childhood and later derogatory remarks in her diary it seems unlikely that a close relationship existed between any of the children and their mother. Mrs Collet had been married previously as on her daughter's birth certificate it states that her mother's name was 'Jane Collet, late Marshall, formerly Sloan'. Presumably her first husband, Mr Marshall, had died young. There is no evidence of any offspring from this marriage.

Clara had a closer relationship with her brothers and sisters than with her mother. She remained close to them to the end of their lives. With her father she shared an interest in the theatre which brought them together for a period but although there is no indication of any problem between the two there is little evidence that they were particularly close, although she did respect him, his work and his views.

In 1935, when she was 75, she wrote an article entitled, 'The Present Position of Women in Industry' which was published in the *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*. In this she says that one of her earliest recollections was with the family at a performance at Drury Lane Theatre when she was only 5 years of age and, 'my first memory of the separate existence of my brothers is my surprise at their enjoyment of the clowning which came like a douche of cold water on my ecstasy after the ballet and transformation scene'.<sup>16</sup> In a Unitarian family such as hers, all the children were treated in a similar way and thus it was not until this time that she first realised that she was different from her brothers. That this apparently insignificant incident remained in her memory all those years later shows its strong impact on her. Clara was, even as a child, not swayed by her brothers' opinions. She did nothing to modify her own attitude but was sure that she was right and her brothers wrong—this ability to stick to her own judgements was a trait which helped her in her adult life. Her brothers were wrong to find the clowns more enjoyable than the ballet which she believed to be better. Even at the age of 5 Clara knew her own mind.

In the same article she recollects an episode which occurred when she was 11 years old. She was taken by her nursemaid for a walk to a nearby field and became drawn into conversation with a 'field labourer, on the other side [of a hedge], who explained to me how the rich ground down the poor and handed me a baked potato from his lunch'. From this incident she became aware of the differences between rich and poor and listened carefully to what the young man said, did not pass comment and earned the reward of

part of his lunch. Her diplomacy skills and ability to communicate with people from all backgrounds were already being formed.

She came from a highly unorthodox background. Most of her ancestors had been religious dissenters; there had been writers of radical newspapers and heretical religious tracts; adventurers travelling far and wide across the globe to India, South America, Australia and New Zealand when these journeys posed serious risks; and there had been wealth passed down from the great Joseph Collet which had been lost.<sup>17</sup>

That many of her predecessors had been followers of the Unitarian faith may account for their adventurous outlook, their fairness in business and their questioning of convention. All of these traits can be seen in Clara. It cannot be an accident that Barbara Leigh Smith (Bodichon), Florence Nightingale, Octavia Hill, Harriet Martineau, Charles Booth, Joseph Chamberlain, Mary Wollstonecraft and Beatrice Potter, all radical thinkers fighting for social justice and equality, were either Unitarians or heavily influenced by their ideals.

What was it about this religion which encouraged its adherents to challenge the social mores and push for change? Unitarianism grew from roots laid down during the Reformation and Renaissance when people throughout Europe were questioning the dogmas of the Catholic faith including corruption by its clerics. All aspects of the faith were challenged including the Trinity, or the worship of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Although Jesus is believed by the Unitarians to have been a wonderful man whose teachings should be followed, it is not felt that there is evidence for his actual worship as the Son of God. The religion began in Eastern Europe where it was tolerated but only became accepted in Britain after the Religious Toleration Act of 1689. It has developed into a religion without a creed where its members are encouraged to think for themselves and to exhibit toleration for others. Unitarians do not believe in the doctrine of original sin or everlasting punishment. They have never adopted an active role in converting people to their religion. The application of reason rather than faith has been instrumental in Unitarians possessing a regard for education. Clara described Unitarianism as ‘a progressive faith, not a Church, and its very implications, when once they have become commonplaces of thought, move the third and fourth generations to go out to discover their grounds of sympathy with other religious bodies’.<sup>18</sup>

Due to their being excluded from mainstream education it was deemed necessary for Unitarians to open institutions primarily for fellow dissenters. Universities such as University College, London, known as the ‘Godless institution in Gower Street’, and the Universities of Manchester, Birmingham and Sheffield<sup>19</sup> were all established in order to provide education for Unitarian men and other dissenters, ‘They were indeed nurseries for revolutionaries, turning out students trained to approach all subjects with a critical rather than a reverent eye.’<sup>20</sup> Oxford and Cambridge Universities did not open their doors to dissenting men until 1871.



1. South Place Ethical Society as it is today. Clara and her father used to lecture at the original site. (David McDonald.)

The Unitarians encouraged women, even as far back as the eighteenth century, to obtain an education in order that they might be able to educate their sons in the absence of available schools, and so a tradition of learning amongst Unitarian women became established. This was formalised with the introduction of colleges such as Bedford College, known as the Ladies' College in London, founded by Elizabeth Reid in 1849. As a result of a campaign by women including Barbara Leigh Smith (Bodichon), and Emily Davies, Girton College, Cambridge was opened to women in 1869, including those of dissenting religions, but they were not allowed to receive a degree, merely a certificate of attendance.

Clara then, was born into a household which encouraged free thought. Her father's editorship of the *Diplomatic Review* resulted in their mixing with many radical visitors and friends. The children were all expected to 'ask questions about anything which roused [their] curiosity'. Although she said that, 'nothing tempted me to read a line of the