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The Political Worlds of Women

Gender and Politics in Nineteenth Century Britain

Sarah Richardson

ROUTLEDGE

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Traditional analyses of nineteenth-century politics have assigned women a peripheral role. By adopting a broader interpretation of political participation, the author identifies how middle-class women were able to contribute to political affairs in the nineteenth century. Examining the contribution that women made to British political life in the period 1800–1870 stimulates debates about gender and politics, the nature of authority and the definition of political culture.

This volume examines female engagement in both traditional and unconventional political arenas, including female sociability, salons, child-rearing and education, health, consumption, religious reform and nationalism. Richardson focuses on middle-class women's social, cultural, intellectual and political authority, as implemented by a range of public figures and lesser-known campaigners. The activists discussed and their varying political, economic and religious backgrounds will demonstrate the significance of female interventions in shaping the political culture of the period and beyond.

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Sarah Richardson

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For Tess

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6.2 contain Parliamentary information licensed under the Open Parliament Licence v1.0. Sailko is the copyright holder of the photograph in Figure 8.2, and it is published under the GNU Free Documentation License; the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike License and the Creative Commons Attribution License. Figure 8.1 is the author's own.

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Introduction

The Political Worlds of Women in Nineteenth-Century Britain

The central question posed by this book is not whether women were able to engage in politics in the nineteenth century—the debate has now moved on, with most historians now acknowledging some level of female activism—but rather what were the nature and extent of their political worlds? The nineteenth century was a period of reform and innovation for women's engagement in public life. In this period women were able to participate in politics at many levels—from the intensely domestic to the wider international sphere—and they developed strategies for interacting with the largely male political world. Far from finding women excluded from the public life of the nation, this analysis uncovers the vast extent of their participation. It presents the positive evidence of female agency in a counter-narrative to that which focuses on the restrictions and exclusions women faced. That women were able to find strategies and negotiate methods of contributing to established political systems demonstrates that the rhetoric surrounding their 'proper' sphere bore little resemblance to the reality of female public life. Women were also able to exercise their own opinion and authority on issues that mattered to them, and thus the notion that politics was largely, if not entirely, a masculine affair is to overlook issues in which women took ownership or those that were adopted equally by both sexes. In 1845, the *Morning Chronicle* attempted to summarise the part women should play in public life:

> That, on the one hand, the active participation of women in political agitation and debate is, generally speaking, decidedly undesirable; that, on the other hand, there are, from time to time, certain public questions of a *quasi*-political character on which the expression of female opinion and feeling is both natural and graceful—are safe truisms. . . . Nor have we any wish to map and mete out the wide space of debateable ground which lies between these two extremes, and say which, of all the questions of the day—political, semi-political, charitable, moral, and mixed—are fit or unfit for female interference . . . When any considerable number of the women of Great Britain testify, by active public co-operation, their interest in a public question, it is a

> tolerably strong presumption that the question really and legitimately belongs to them.[1]

Mapping out the terrain—this 'wide space of debateable ground'—of female political engagement in this period has led to a fresh consideration of their role in familiar areas such as philanthropy, petitioning, and pressure group politics. But less obvious sectors have also been explored, including the science of domestic economy, women's interaction with Parliament, and their activities overseas. The women discussed in this book do not fit neatly into a particular category or group. There are representatives from a diverse range of backgrounds, in terms of their religion, age, location, status, wealth, life experience, and class. They lived in all areas of Britain: in rural parishes, in small market towns, in the emerging industrial centres of the north and midlands, and, of course, in the metropolis. Some also resided for periods of their lives, overseas in Europe or the Empire. Whilst it is not possible to give equal coverage to all of these locations, enough examples are provided to demonstrate that these female activists were not confined to a particular area or type of place. Scotland and Ireland for example, offered differing opportunities for participation, than those in England, just as women in rural parishes worked within a specific political milieu in contrast to that of an industrial city. Many of the women discussed were single or widowed, which allowed them certain freedoms to participate in the public sphere, for example, to exercise the franchise in many local and parish elections. However, nearly as many were married, often exploiting their husband's social and professional networks to further their own political objectives. Political networks and membership of activist dynasties or friendship groups were often key to encouraging women to participate in the public sphere. Their religious backgrounds ranged from adherence to radical nonconformist sects to the support of mainstream, established Anglicanism.

Religion often informed female engagement in public affairs, but it is not necessarily the case that women from the same religious group possessed a similar political outlook or agreed on the direction of their activism. Boyd Hilton, in his forensic analysis of the Evangelical movement in Britain distinguished between 'moderate' and 'ultra' Evangelicals. The former tended to view misfortune within the context of God's divine plans for the redemption of humankind and thus adhered to a 'laissez-faire' position, arguing that whilst it was Christian to alleviate the needs of the poor on an individual basis, to intervene in a systematic manner threatened to undermine the intentions of Providence. 'Ultra' Evangelicals, on the other hand, refuted the view that Providence could be calculated on a rational basis and increasingly asserted the need for paternalistic action to remedy contemporary social and industrial ills.[2] Priscilla Maurice, sister of the eminent clergyman and theologian, F. D. Maurice, in a series of books and pamplets addressed to the sick and the dying, called upon sufferers to look upon illness as a mission, a work, or a vocation.[3] In contrast, women such as the

Oxfordshire writer, Esther Copley asserted that the wealthy had neglected their duties to care for the poor. For Copley, the answer was economic reform. In a determined rejection of the tenets of political economy she advocated higher wages and proposed that labourers should be given their own plots of land.[4] The 'ultra' Evangelical, Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, also advocated the need for greater state intervention to solve the problems of the poor, bitterly condemning the failure of parliament to address the social and economic deprivation caused by the greed of modern capitalism.[5]

Most of the women (but not all) discussed in this book would identify themselves with the developing middle-class identity of the new industrial age. Their economic, social, political, and cultural condition distinguished them from the aristocratic elite, and from the massed ranks of the labouring poor. The formation of this shared, if perhaps imagined, identity has been rigorously analysed by generations of historians.[6] Many commentators have emphasised that the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere was essentially, if not exclusively, masculine. Simon Gunn, for example, argued that 'the exclusion of women from the public sphere was not incidental but fundamental to its constitution.'[7] Davidoff and Hall, in their renowned analysis of the formation of middle-class identity also emphasised that it should be refracted through a heavily gendered lens.[8] However, more recent analyses have challenged the view that middle-class women were marginalised in public life. Simon Morgan has asserted that women played an important role in the formation of the public identity of the Victorian middle class, developing a nascent civic consciousness.[9] Kathryn Gleadle termed women in this period 'borderline citizens' and explored the 'diversity and dynamism' of their political activism.[10] Of course, there were political arenas which were exclusively masculine, although these are perhaps fewer than many historians have claimed. There were also public spaces that were dominated by women. Political activities did not necessarily take place along public/private boundaries, nor were they inevitably gender segregated. In certain fields, for example philanthropy, the boundaries between the public and private spheres intersected. Thus the notion of public and private should be understood as ideological constructs, utilised in different ways for particular purposes, rather than fixed, unchanging entities.

This emphasis on the importance of class has determined the chronological scope of this study. The time-span is not fixed or precise, but covers the period from the French Revolution to the emergence of the organised female suffrage movements in the later nineteenth century. This coincides with the zenith of the dominance of middle-class political ideology. It is the period where the 'modern' political environment emerged with the extension of the franchise in 1832 and 1867; legislation enacting social, economic, and political reforms; the rise of mass political parties and pressure groups. For some historians, these changes 'encouraged the private, individual, and masculine uses of politics.'[11] But in fact, alongside innovations in political practice, older forms of participation—such as petitioning,

personal canvassing, and patronage—persisted. Newer formats, for example, pressure groups, also offered opportunities for female contributions. Women were thus able to employ an array of strategies to engage with current affairs and contribute to public policy and debates often utilising their informal social networks to counter the more formalised, and more masculine, environments of political clubs and associations.[12]

Some of the women discussed in this book are renowned political actors in the period. For example the life, work, and political engagement of Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Fry, Caroline Chisholm, and Frances Power Cobbe are re-assessed by considering their contributions in particular sites of public activism. However, most of the women encountered in this analysis are less well known, even those who were prominent and successful during their lifetimes. The names of Margaret Fison, Janet Aitken Wilson, Christian Isobel Johnstone, Harriet Grote, Helen Macfarlane, and Theodosia Trollope may not immediately spring to mind in an exploration of female political culture, but each of them played an influential role in one, or more, aspects of contemporary public life. A further group only feature in official written records because they initiated or signed petitions, cast votes in local elections, or held minor public offices. The votes of Grace Brown, a plural elector in the parish of St Chad's, Lichfield in 1843, are recorded only by chance in a rare example of a poll book for the election of a local overseer. The serial petitioner, Frances Barlee, was regularly mentioned in the pages of her local newspaper, but her strategic use of appeals to Parliament to settle her personal and local disputes, have been overlooked by historians who focus on the major political petitions of the period. Thus the women who participated in politics were not a few, atypical, well-connected eccentrics, although, clearly, there was a place for such activists. Most were women who held positions of authority in their local neighbourhoods. Many cared passionately about specific causes or campaigns and wrote about these in pamphlets, newspapers, poems, and novels. They acted as 'field' workers committed to improving the lives of the poor, sick, elderly, and disadvantaged. Some appeared as 'expert witnesses' before Parliamentary commissions or local committees of enquiry. Others campaigned tirelessly for causes as diverse as peace, animal rights, or national self-determination. Records of their endeavours and achievements are easily found on the pages of established sources for political history: newspapers; parliamentary papers; political pamphlets; Hansard; poll books; petitions; and politicians' papers and memoirs. Less conventional sources may also reveal evidence of the rich female political culture, and this book utilises domestic science manuals, didactic texts, court cases, visual sources, and travel literature. Key evidence comes from the pens of the women themselves: letters, diaries, poems, pamphlets, tracts, novels, memoirs, autobiography, articles, and translations all disclose traces of their political commitment and enthusiasm.

* * * * *

The political engagement of some of these lesser known women is at the heart of this book. As an introductory study demonstrating the vibrancy and diversity of women's engagement with politics, consider the case of Margracia Loudon.

In the 1830s a middle-class Irish woman, based in the developing spa town of Leamington in Warwickshire took the literary and political world by storm. She was a prominent novelist, signed by the leading publisher, Richard Bentley and was also perhaps the most influential female contributor to the intellectual debate on the repeal of the Corn Laws. Her *Philanthropic Economy,* which was published in 1835, was an innovative attempt to redefine the very nature of government activity and to recast the bases of political economy.[13] The work was widely reviewed and published in several editions before the Anti-Corn Law League chose a section to be distributed to all electors in the 1840s (around nine million copies). Yet her publications and even her name—Margracia Loudon—are largely unknown today.[14] An evaluation of her political life and work demonstrate not only the richness and diversity of the political worlds of middle-class women in the nineteenth century but also the challenges posed in recapturing these.

Many of the details of Margracia's life are unknown. Her date of birth is estimated as c. 1788 at the family estate of Castle Ryves in County Limerick, and she died in Cheltenham, Gloucester in 1860.[15] She came from a literary family. Her mother, Frances Catherine Ryves, published an extended poetic narrative entitled *Cumbrian Legends; or, Tales of Other Times*.[16] The work, inspired by a visit to the Lake District in 1806 was privately printed but supported by an impressive list of over 450 subscribers including Walter Scott, Joanna Baillie, the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, and a number of plantation owners from the West Indies. The poetic tales themselves drew on the contemporary fashion for antiquarianism and gothic influences. But the publication is dedicated to Princess Charlotte and prefaced by an overtly political address referring to 'these disastrous times . . . where equal rights unequal ranks restrain.' The poem ends with an appeal to the Princess, 'whose youthful promise boasts the liberal hand' to ensure her reign overcomes coercion and despotism and heralds a new era of justice and freedom.[17] After her father's death in 1817, Margracia moved with her mother and sisters to Bath and the family later sold the Castle Ryves estate. At the age of 42 she married a Scottish physician, Charles Loudon, thirteen years her junior. Loudon had established himself in practice at the new spa resort of Leamington in 1828 and published the first analysis of the spa waters.[18] In 1833 he was chosen as one of the medical commissioners for the Royal Commission on the Employment of Children in Factories collecting evidence from the northeastern districts including Yorkshire. His appointment was haphazard and apparently made on account of his connections with the leading Whig aristocracy who frequented the spas at Leamington.[19] However he proved more diligent than the other medical officers and thus quickly fell out with Edwin Chadwick, the lead commissioner, for

asserting that there was a link between long hours and the poor health of children in factories.[20] Charles Loudon, like his wife, also wrote political pamphlets and tracts. He contributed to the debate on population growth countering Malthus's notion of a 'positive check' on population.[21] In a more extensive work, published in Paris just before his death, he argued for the moral and physical benefits of mass education.[22]

Margracia's work and her contribution to politics are best described as eclectic. *Philanthropic Economy*, which is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, brought her fame and notoriety because of its section on the Corn Laws. But the pamphlet extended into such areas as wealth creation, currency reform, taxation policy, primogeniture, Irish church property and church reform, the franchise, the ballot, and the role of MPs. In the introduction to the tract, she acknowledged that she may be attacked for tackling the 'masculine' subject of political economy. Indeed one reviewer remarked upon her courage in entering 'so disputatious and perilous a field' and indeed, she received some hostile notices mostly from the conservative periodicals.[23] However, in general, the work was well-received and proved one of the most influential pamphlets of the period. The work was even credited by the *Liverpool Mercury* as playing a role in the establishment of the Anti-Corn Law League.[24] She had previewed many of the topics raised in *Philanthropic Economy* in her humorous three volume novel, *Fortune Hunting,* set in Leamington Spa. This considered the connection between politics and philanthropy, the notion of a House of Ladies, a female Reform Bill, and property entailed only to female descendants.[25] Her second major political work was a series of essays some of which were published in the *Metropolitan Magazine* and others in book form in 1845–6.[26] These essays drew on the fashionable philosophy of 'mental science' and developed from Margracia's interest in phrenology.[27] The essays linked the application of the 'laws of mental science' in the private sphere (the upbringing of children, parental authority, treatment of servants, and education) to the development of a more civilized and benevolent public sphere, culminating in the institution of an international parliament. Her blueprint for this assembly included the following:

> That the members of the international Parliament should be constituted the trustees of the lives, rights, and entire property of the whole family of man . . . That human life is sacred. That, therefore, neither military nor civil laws can legalise the act of taking away life . . . That the destruction wantonly, as during wars, of any portion of the whole amount of the real wealth of the entire family of man is criminal, to whomsoever the divided portion may individually belong. That toleration in matters of religion is conducive to the increase of *real worship*. That legislators are bound to give education to their people adequate to their wants; and to conduct their educational systems of rules deduced from the natural laws of mind. That such a code of international laws may reasonably be looked for as a further step in civilization . . . [28]

She reprised some of these subjects in her last novel, *Maternal Love*, which was published in 1849.[29] Loudon's political voice was given enhanced authority by placing her work within an academic context. She drew upon disciplines at the forefront of contemporary political ideology: political economy, moral philosophy, metaphysics, and mental science. But her writing always contained a practical element, giving examples of direct action in order to promote her philosophical ideas. It is this combination of theory and practice which made her work so attractive to contemporaries.

The Loudons' period of residence in Paris in the 1840s brought them into contact with a wide range of European émigrés, and it was the fate of the Christian population of Bulgaria that led to her last published political work, *The Voice of Bulgaria*.[30] The pamphlet was written with her customary verve and passion, describing Bulgaria as 'a bleeding martyr in the centre of Christian Europe.' She called for a subscription to establish a school in England for Christian Bulgarian children, having argued a couple of years earlier that, 'The Bulgarians want education as much as the English want money and the French pleasure.'[31] She also included her own translations of Bulgarian documents which she annexed to the pamphlet. The *Voice of Bulgaria* was an extraordinary intervention in British foreign policy towards eastern Europe and the Ottoman Empire. British attitudes, shaped by its ambassadors to the region, were firmly wedded to a policy of appeasing the Turks. The *Voice of Bulgaria* challenged this complacency and warned of massacres to come if action was not taken. However, Loudon's was a lone voice. In the end it took Gladstone's impassioned pamphlet, *Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East* to force a change of stance towards the Ottomans in Bulgaria.[32]

Margracia Loudon left no major archive, thus apart from her published oeuvre (five novels, three political tracts and articles in, for example, *The Leader, Metropolitan Magazine*, and *Monthly Repository*) there are only glimpses of her activities largely contained in the records of others. She wrote to both Sir Robert Peel (in 1846) and Richard Cobden (in 1851) unsuccessfully seeking a pension or other form of testimonial in recognition of her political writing on the repeal of the Corn Laws. Other than these fragments there is little evidence remaining of the woman whose name was once routinely linked with those of Jane Marcet and Harriet Martineau.

* * * * *

So, why is it important to recover and reconsider Loudon's contribution to political discourse? In many ways the vignettes that survive of her life along with her published outputs are indicative of the contributions of a wide range of nineteenth-century middle-class women. These women came from a diverse range of backgrounds and held widely differing political, religious, and moral viewpoints, but their participation enriched and informed debate on state policy, and they developed strategies for (middle-class) women to

take an active role in public affairs. An analysis of Margracia Loudon's role leads to a greater understanding of the political worlds of these women.

One of the most important aspects of Loudon's contribution was the use she made of the written word to proselytise her political message. Loudon utilised a wide range of formats to ensure her arguments reached a wide audience including novels, pamphlets, periodical articles, letters, and translations. The written form was one of the key methods in which the women discussed in this book contributed to the political and cultural debates of the period. It is often in their writing that their political activism is revealed. The sheer variety of forms employed—pamphlets, novels, poetry, newspaper and periodical articles, religious tracts, translations of key political texts or handbooks, letters, journals, educational works, and treatises—demonstrate the rich diversity of women's contribution and the range of their participation. Sometimes the work was produced anonymously or under a pseudonym, but increasingly women were publishing under their own names, and on topics of public policy. Women were productive and successful authors in the nineteenth century writing some of the most successful prose of the period. But they were also prolific consumers, providing the primary market for an eclectic range of novels, magazines, periodicals, and non-fiction works.[33] Women employed genre as unlikely as travel writing and domestic economy texts to engage their readership with the key political, economic, and social issues of the time. For example, considerations on public policy towards the poor emerged in tomes on household management and discussions on forms of government or educational systems featured in journals of travel literature. Often writers interleaved political messages in novels, plays, poems, and periodical articles many of which were based on serious research in parliamentary journals and social investigations.[34] Such women were targeting an informed readership—of men as well as of women—and one often-stated motive was to provide information in order to improve and enhance the lot of the masses in society. Thus, periodical editors such as Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna outlining the purpose of her *Christian Lady's Magazine* in 1834 stated, 'It is our ambition, not merely to supply our friends with a periodical that may amuse them for a fleeting hour, but to furnish their shelves with an occasional volume of useful reference on topics of permanent importance.'[35] Tonna ensured that the periodical she edited incorporated articles on the key questions of the day as varied as factory legislation, education reform, and the Irish famine.

Loudon and other female political activists situated their policies and ideas for practical actions within an overarching intellectual framework. A theoretical underpinning provided authority to the writing and engaged a particular learned audience. Loudon drew her ideas from a wide range of disciplines including political economy, education, and moral philosophy. Her writing was fully referenced, and she utilised the works of Adam Smith, Robert Torrens, Lord Fitzwilliam, Daniel Gaskell, Sydney Smith, and Thomas Perronet Thompson among others. Loudon, like other

important women writers of the period fully embraced the emergent discipline of social science which had been strongly associated with reform from the 1820s onwards.[36] The most notable expression of this desire to place practical reforming strategies within an intellectual context came with the foundation of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science (better known as the Social Science Association or SSA) in 1857. This organisation drew upon long-established networks of reform. Founded at a meeting hosted by the veteran politician, Lord Brougham, the organisation was strongly influenced by the British Association for the Advancement of Science (founded in 1831) and drew together campaigners from the fields of married women's property rights, law reform, education, public health, the treatment of poverty, and commercial policy. The SSA was to function as a platform for the dissemination of ideas and policies concerning the implementation of a wide variety of social policy initiatives. It focussed upon five primary areas: jurisprudence, education, criminal punishment and reform, public health, and 'social economy.' Members were encouraged to compile detailed reports on subjects of public interest that were then presented at its annual meetings, held across the country.[37] Women played a critical and prominent role in the proceedings of the society. They were not only encouraged to write and deliver papers themselves, but were treated as experts in such matters as workhouse reform, criminal rehabilitation, and pauper education. It was a woman, Margaret Fison, who furnished the society with its first handbook publishing volumes on both the SSA and on the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1859.[38] Fison's aim in these publications was to publicise the conclusions of emergent scientific and statistical knowledge and to make direct connections with the moral and religious condition of the people.[39] In her handbook for the SSA she related statistics on crime, education, and sanitation into an argument for legislative changes intended to lead to the moral and physical improvement of the working class writing:

> While statistics reveal that crime is not the necessary attendant upon poverty or low wages, they show it is found most abundant in closely crowded houses, in ill-drained localities, while the morals of the poor quickly manifest an improvement when sanitary reform has been carried out in their dwellings.[40]

A review of Fison's work in the *Leader* argued that such examples justified 'the increasing influence of female influence on public policy.'[41] Fison delivered three papers to the SSA on education, sanitary reform, and temperance reform. But she was no mere theorist. Along with her work for the SSA and British Association for the Advancement of Science, she was also on the committee of the Ladies Sanitary Association and secretary of the Ladies Temperance Society.[42] As part of her work on sanitary reform she visited over fifty towns and parishes encouraging the establishment of

sanitary associations to improve the health of the poor, speaking to working class audiences as well as local luminaries and women's organisations. Fison, like Loudon, drew primarily on the discipline of political economy citing Mill's words 'intellectual speculations must be looked upon as a most influential part of the productive labour of society, and the portion of its resources employed in carrying on and remunerating such labour as a highly productive part of its expenditure' at the start of the *Handbook for the British Association for the Advancement of Science*.[43] She also advocated measures such as the peasant proprietorship of land and the adoption of savings schemes which had both been promoted by Mill in his *Principles of Political Economy*.[44] She considered that there was a particular role for women in the emergence of the state arguing for a new understanding of their role in public life including recognition of their importance to the formation of public opinion.[45]

A distinctive characteristic of many of these contributions to political discourse was the evidence drawn from areas concerned with the reform of everyday life. Loudon, in common with many of her contemporaries drew on the burgeoning interest in alternative approaches to topics such as health, diet, consumption, and child-rearing and placed these in a wider political context. This concept of what would today be termed 'lifestyle politics' involved the politicisation of leisure and consumption practices and the promotion of the social responsibilities associated with all aspects of domestic life.[46] The politics of consumption was a significant tool in mobilising a diverse range of women on issues such as anti-slavery and free trade.[47] Women from all classes promoted 'ethical' consumption practices and withdrew custom from retailers stocking slave-grown sugar. Others employed strategies of 'exclusive dealing' shopping only where proprietors shared similar political viewpoints. Kathryn Gleadle has recently drawn attention to the importance of 'health reform' in this period. She focused on five areas of 'physiological reform'—vegetarianism, homeopathy, hydropathy, hygeism, and medical botany—in order to reassess women's role in the politics of reform in the 1840s.[48] Phrenology and phreno-mesmerism was also a field that attracted female reformers because of its followers' promotion of equality, education, and emancipation.[49] By focusing on these 'domestic' concerns, women reformers were able to entwine the private domain of the home and family with public policy concerns. Thus Elizabeth Heyrick (née Coltman) of Leicester could publish pamphlets against slavery, bull-baiting, and capital punishment, and support a more humanitarian approach to prisoners and vagrants, yet at the same time maintain advocacy of the separate spheres discourse. In her *Familiar Letters* she wrote:

> If public offices, political transactions, commercial exertions, be the province of man; the education of children, the order and economy of the family, and the business of creating the pleasure of home, all