

Elizabeth Garrett Anderson in context: the origins of the women's movement in mid-Victorian Britain

By Professor Lawrence Goldman

In 1840 in London at the first World Anti-Slavery Convention, a woman rose to speak from the separate enclosure where all women attendees at the meeting had been corralled. There was consternation and uproar and she was silenced.

The following day *The Times* carried an editorial on the meeting and made unkind remarks on the manners of our American cousins because the woman in question was from the United States. Her name was Elizabeth Cady Stanton and she is often compared with Millicent Garrett Fawcett, the equally famous sister of Elizabeth Garrett Anderson.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton led the movement for women's enfranchisement in America in the late-19th century and often attested that it was her treatment in London in 1840 which made her the leading American feminist of her generation. In Britain in 1840 no respectable woman would speak in public; that was the privilege of men only.

Yet fast-forward to Birmingham in October 1857 and the opening congress of an organisation called the Social Science Association, and here, for the first time, 17 years later, a middle-class woman spoke in open and mixed company. Her name was Mary Carpenter and she spoke about her work rescuing street children in Bristol and educating them in so-called ragged schools.

Miss Carpenter was already a famous female philanthropist and the audience for this landmark speech was so large that the meeting was delayed while everyone moved to a bigger venue. From this start, the Social Science Association became the pre-eminent venue for women to discuss feminist issues in public in mid-Victorian Britain; among those who attended and spoke at its meetings were the two Garrett sisters, Elizabeth and Millicent.

It was during the 1850s that an organised feminist movement emerged in Britain and the Garrett sisters made contact with it in London. But it was not a movement initially focused on winning the vote for women, the great issue that dominated Millicent's life and which she lived to achieve. The vote was but one of several feminist campaigns of this era, and by no means the first. That distinction belongs to the campaign to change the laws regulating the disposal of property in marriage as they affected women. Under the common law, an unmarried woman had complete control of her property and its disposal as did any man. But once she married, her property became her husband's, to do with as he liked. Thus, when in 1875 Millicent's purse was stolen and the thief was apprehended and brought to court, it was referred to as 'Mr Henry Fawcett's purse', the property of her husband, the Liberal MP and Professor of Political Economy in Cambridge, Henry Fawcett.

To right this obvious wrong the first organised feminist campaign of this or any age in Britain was established by the Married Women's Property Committee in 1854. It brought together concerned women and sought the support and expertise of sympathetic lawyers and men of affairs. It was led by two women in particular, Barbara Leigh-Smith (later known as Barbara Bodichon after her marriage) and Bessie Rayner Parkes, who would found in 1858 and edit the first feminist periodical in Britain, the *English Woman's Journal*.

The campaign to change the property laws did not succeed at this point: a bill introduced in parliament by sympathetic MPs in 1857 was ultimately withdrawn. But legislation drafted by the Social Science Association in 1870 – a first Married Women's Property Act – and then a second Act in 1882, equalised the conditions applying to the sexes' holding of property after marriage, and set a precedent for the use of legislation to redress women's inequalities in

Britain. As for Bodichon and Bessie Parkes, they went on to found the so-called Langham Place Circle in London in 1857 to build on this campaign and extend feminism to other areas of law and social life, and we celebrate this as the first feminist network in Britain. Elizabeth and Millicent made contact with the Ladies of Langham Place in the following year.

If we pause for a moment and ask why British feminism began with a focus on the equalisation of property laws we can learn a lot about the mid-Victorian women's movement. Obviously, the movement sought equality for women and this was a glaring example of inequality. But it was an inequality that more and more women were experiencing because in mid-Victorian Britain women were writing for journals and periodicals in ever-increasing numbers. This was a new age of mass-literacy and of the printed word; in 1855 Mr Gladstone as Chancellor of the Exchequer, removed all indirect taxes on newspapers and magazines, and reading and writing boomed as never before. But women writers found that legally, the fees they earned belonged to their husbands, and not surprisingly the majority of members of the Married Women's Property Committee were female authors.

More generally, this was an era of emancipation and equality for many groups. That is what defines what we call 'Victorian liberalism', an outlook embraced by both major political parties, Conservative as well as Liberal. Working-class men had claimed the vote in the Chartist movement of the 1830s and 1840s, and the first of them would be enfranchised by the Second Reform Act of 1867. Protestant non-conformists, Roman Catholics and Jews – all those who were not Anglicans – achieved legal and civil equality in this period in various bouts of legislation from the abolition of penal laws on protestant dissenters in 1828 to the opening up of fellowships in Oxford and Cambridge to all faiths, and to none, in 1871.

In the same year, after a long campaign, the Trade Union Act recognised trade unions as legal corporations and furthered the process, building on earlier legislation, to remove penal sanctions on workingmen for belonging to a trade union. If all these groups could seek redress from parliament in this period, why not women also?

It helped that the leading feminists of this era were well-connected middle-class women who could call on the support of male family members and friends. Barbara Leigh-Smith was the daughter and granddaughter of two radical MPs, and a cousin of Florence Nightingale as well. Bessie Parkes was the daughter of Joseph Parkes, another very notable radical MP. Henry Fawcett was another young radical. He had first proposed to *Elizabeth* Garrett in 1864. With her thoughts set on her medical career, Elizabeth turned him down. Henry then proposed to, and married, her sister Millicent in the following year – the year in which he was first elected to parliament as MP for Brighton. It is said that being blind, Henry fell in love with the sound of Millicent's voice at a party in the London home of another radical Liberal MP, Peter Taylor. Whether that story is true or not, we can see a very strong relationship between pioneer women feminists and male supporters, many of whom were on the radical left of Victorian politics.

These male supporters might be fathers like Newson Garrett of Aldeburgh, who encouraged his daughters in their education, and in their professional and political ambitions. Or we might mention Richard Potter, the railway promoter and enlightened father of the later social reformer and original Fabian socialist, Beatrice Webb. Or Richard Pankhurst, the Manchester solicitor who married Emmeline and was father to Sylvia and Christabel, the infamous suffragettes. Or John Stuart Mill, author of the crucial text *The Subjection of Women*, published in 1863, and the parliamentary supporter of women's enfranchisement when he was briefly an MP between 1865 and 1868.

The early women's movement depended on the support and patronage of feminist men, and at organisations like the Social Science Association women were enabled to seek their support. Thus, Emily Davies, one of Elizabeth Garrett Anderson's closest friends, was a

frequent attendee at SSA congresses where she sought-out rich and sympathetic men who might fund her idea of a university college for women, what soon became Girton College, Cambridge. Meanwhile the second women's college in Cambridge, Newnham, was projected at a meeting of sympathetic male dons in the parlour of Henry and Millicent's house in Cambridge in 1870. We should never forget the role that men played in this movement, in other words.

Sitting through endless worthy meetings of Victorian organisations could be awfully boring work, of course. Elizabeth Garrett had doubts about attending the 1862 Social Science Association Congress in London: as she wrote to her mother:

'It presents an opportunity for doing some knitting, if I were great in that line. I believe the meetings go on incessantly, with relays of fresh subjects and speakers (and audiences too, it may be hoped) for nine days.'

But she did attend, and four years later when the Association met in Manchester she delivered a paper there herself. As she wrote beforehand to Emily Davies:

'For several reasons, I incline to do it myself, but I shall not like to do it if you think it unwise. My reasons are 1st that it is a pity to let the woman's element in the Assn. expire for want of people who will use the liberty offered them. 2nd that reading papers is the first step towards being allowed to join in the discussions; 3rd that the paper would be more attended to if I read it myself. 4th That I have a tolerably strong voice and am neither hideous, young, nor beautiful. If you think these reasons sufficient, I will practise reading aloud.'

The multiple anxieties here about the politics of public speaking, womanly decorum, and appearance, are evidence of the dilemmas women faced when entering the public sphere. In all, 126 women spoke at the Social Science Association, contributing 269 papers in all, and they included many of the leaders of the women's movement: not only Barbara Bodichon and Bessie Parkes but Dorothea Beale, founder of Cheltenham Ladies College; Lydia Becker the editor of the *Women's Suffrage Journal* for 20 years; Octavia Hill, housing reformer and founder of the National Trust; and Florence Nightingale who contributed some seven papers to the Association on aspects of nursing and hospital management, starting in 1858, though they were read for her by others. Millicent Garrett attended meetings but did not give a paper of her own; instead she read the address of her husband to the 1868 Congress in Birmingham.

Five women physicians spoke at the Association in addition to Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, all of them famous pioneers of a medical career for women. They included the first of them all, Elizabeth Blackwell, who had trained as a doctor in the United States and returned to practise medicine in this country. It was Elizabeth Garrett's meeting with Blackwell in 1859 through their joint membership of the Langham Place Circle that set her on her way to a career in medicine. Despite what is sometimes written and thought, Elizabeth was not the first female physician in Britain – Blackwell was that – but she was the first to be trained in Britain and then to practice here.

Beyond the equalisation of the laws and access to the professions, the mid-Victorian women's movement was focused on many other issues as well. We have to conceive of a broad front across which women activists worked to push back the boundaries of the possible in the 1860s and 1870s.

In education, new schools were founded for girls like Cheltenham Ladies College and North London Collegiate. We have already mentioned colleges in Cambridge and also Oxford which opened their doors from 1869. Women campaigned to be eligible to sit the new

Oxford and Cambridge Local Examinations, introduced by the universities in the late 1850s to help set and raise standards in secondary education across the country. These were the ancestors of our A-levels of today and Cambridge opened them up to women candidates in 1865.

Four years later in 1869 a little-known piece of legislation passed by the first Gladstone government, the Endowed Schools Act, allowed for the reform and redeployment of educational endowments across the country, and brought into being some of the finest girls' schools in the country. Once again, it was the work of feminist men acting on behalf of feminist women.

In an age when the employment of middle-class women was an especial problem there were several ventures to improve opportunities for them. Hitherto, women from a good home who did not marry or had no means could become a governess or perhaps emigrate, but there was little else. Jessie Boucherett's Society for Promoting the Employment of Women, founded in 1858, tried to find other alternatives.

One such, also founded at this time and much celebrated in feminist circles, was the Victoria Press established by Emily Faithfull, a printing and publishing enterprise staffed only by women. Faithfull became 'printer and publisher in ordinary' to Queen Victoria, published the very popular *Victoria Magazine*, and printed the voluminous transactions of the Social Science Association.

Women were also active in the field of public health, a central concern in an era that struggled with the awful consequences of diseases whose causes were not understood, and for which there were no cures. The modern sciences of bacteriology and epidemiology did not emerge until later. In an age of carbolic and scrub, therefore, the Ladies National Association for the Diffusion of Sanitary Knowledge did what it could to disseminate good practice and good habits among working-class women. I

It had been founded in 1858 by the female secretary of the Social Science Association, Isa Craig, and our very own Elizabeth Garrett, among others. The Manchester branch has the distinction of introducing in Britain the practice of home visiting directly after a birth. Louisa Twining's Workhouse Visiting Society was more than a vehicle for traditional womanly assistance to the poor. It promoted the improvement of conditions under the Poor Law and introduced some women to the serious investigation of poverty. Ten years later women would help to found the Charity Organisation Society, a pioneer in London of case-work with individual families in need of help and support, and one of the originators of modern social work.

All this activity might suggest that the mid-Victorian women's movement was united in its quest for equality and an enhanced social role for women. And broadly that was true. But like any great social movement faced by injustice and historic wrongs there were differences over tactics and approach. Much later, in the early 20th century, Millicent would face the famous challenge of the suffragettes, for example. For decades, she had led the peaceful protests of suffragists campaigning for the vote in the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. Now she faced the militant suffragettes of the Women's Social and Political Union, and she believed that violence and unlawfulness would play into the hands of the movement's opponents.

In the same way, there were differences in the women's movement in the 1860s and 1870s. Mary Carpenter and others like her believed that women should avoid political subjects, indeed, play no role in politics, but seek to widen the women's sphere by good works alone. Emily Davies was a close friend of Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, but though she pursued radical liberal men for money and support, she later became Conservative in her politics.

Earlier, in the 1860s, she had favoured the vote for single women and widows only, not for all women, and she came to believe that pursuing women's suffrage would hamper the cause to which she was most devoted, the higher education of women.

As for Elizabeth, she found herself in opposition to most women and feminists over one of the great *causes celebres* of the age, the Contagious Diseases Acts. There were three of these passed by parliament in 1864, 1866 and 1869. They were passed to try to control the spread of venereal diseases, then at epidemic levels in the army and navy. Introduced at first to regulate designated ports and towns with barracks, they were successively extended geographically to take in almost all military facilities in the country, and some zealots would have extended them to the whole nation. They allowed the police and military authorities to apprehend suspected prostitutes, subject them to forcible internal examination, and if found to be diseased, detain them legally in so-called 'lock hospitals' for three months, where regular doses of the poison mercury would be administered as a cure.

At the end of the 1860s a movement emerged to secure their repeal, led by another great pioneering woman of the age, Mrs Josephine Butler. To many women and men, these laws were unconscionable. They accepted the fact of prostitution and sought merely to regulate it, to make it disease-free, as it were. They blamed women for the diseases carried also by men, who would suffer no punishment for their part in the sexual act. There were soon stories of perfectly respectable Victorian women and their daughters being pulled off the streets and subjected to internal examination. At root, this was unequal legislation and an assault on civil liberties. Radical feminists and conservative churchmen could unite for the repeal of these heinous measures in one of the great extra-parliamentary agitations of the Victorian period. And they were successful: in 1886, the Contagious Diseases Acts were repealed.

But one notable group defended them throughout, the medical profession. Only too well aware of the awful effects of venereal diseases, and the inefficacy of the treatments for them, most doctors defended the acts, and the infringements they allowed, as necessary for the public's health and the public good. Libertarian arguments that the state had no business infringing the rights of citizens in this manner, deploying a sort of medical police force, were answered by utilitarian arguments from the medical profession that the greatest happiness of the greatest number required such draconian intervention. And in this dispute, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson split from her feminist friends and colleagues and supported the Acts, publishing a short study in their favour in 1870 entitled *An Enquiry into the Character of the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1866-69*. At the Social Science Association in 1870 she found herself in debate with another notable reformer of the era, a man called Frederic Hill, who was a staunch opponent of the measures. Elizabeth contended that it was 'strictly a professional question, upon which the opinion of the trustworthy medical witnesses ought to be accepted as final'. But Hill responded that it required 'other knowledge than that of medicine' to appreciate the issues involved. As he went on: 'It would be as reasonable to leave it to farmers to say whether or not it was necessary to have corn laws', a reference to the controversial Corn Laws of 1815 which protected the home market for British farmers but which were repealed in the movement for free trade in 1846.

In an extended struggle for legal, political and civil equality, the feminist arguments of this era, just as today, were generally premised on the fundamental equality of men and women and women's capacity to do everything as well, if not better, than men. The Fawcett family provided a very famous example of this in 1890 when Philippa Fawcett, daughter of Millicent and niece of Elizabeth, and then at Newnham College, came top of the Mathematical Tripos in Cambridge that year, beating the officially-designated Senior Wrangler in the final examinations, the blue-ribbon event of English academic life.

But women weren't officially classified at this time, though they took the same examinations as the men and though they were marked by the same examiners. Indeed, disgracefully, it wasn't until 1948 that Cambridge allowed women students to take degrees (in Oxford it was 1920). As news of Philippa's success – to have beaten the Senior Wrangler – spread round Cambridge, the town was convulsed, and on the following day *The Times* carried another famous leading article saluting the achievements of women as the intellectual equals of men. The comparison with the leading article 50 years earlier in 1840 which I referred to at the beginning, is a measure of the progress of the women's movement.

Yet if we read the tracts and speeches of the 1850s and 1860s with care we sometimes find a different argument being made: that women and men were intrinsically different in their talents and capacities, and for that reason women required education and social emancipation so they could fulfil their different ambitions and in so doing, complement men. This is sometimes referred to as 'difference feminism' as distinct from the much more common 'equality feminism' with which we're entirely more familiar today. But arguments favoured by mid-Victorian feminists sometimes took this other and more controversial line.

John Stuart Mill argued that women should be educated to the highest possible level to ensure they could be intellectual companions for their husbands and role models for their sons. Even a radical feminist like Barbara Bodichon believed that women were temperamentally distinguishable from men and that these differences in nature and talent mandated a different role: as she was to put it, 'Women will rather prefer those nobler works which have in them something congenial to their moral natures'. This may have been a tactical position: at a time when women needed male support it would have been counter-productive to have espoused a strident egalitarianism. An argument for 'difference' allowed women a social function, which was better than no function at all. Nevertheless, the belief in moral and mental differences between the sexes was characteristic of this period and was held in public by women as well as by men.

These differences in the movement should be seen as natural and inevitable in a campaign over so long a period that took in so many issues and injustices. And at times, over specific issues, pioneers like Elizabeth and Millicent could find themselves defending unpopular positions, forced to choose as Elizabeth was in 1870 between her medical and her feminist callings. One of the first and greatest accounts of the women's movement published in 1928 by Ray Strachey, was entitled *The Cause*. I still set it as a key work on my reading lists for Victorian history. But as I hope this talk has suggested, the mid-Victorian women's movement was not a single cause but a series of causes, women's movements, in which groups and activists over periods of time, and over specific issues, argued and divided as well as combined together. One thing is certain, however: whatever the twists and turns, Elizabeth and Millicent were always at the very centre.