

WOMEN IN PUBLIC 1850-1900

Documents of the Victorian Women's
Movement

Patricia Hollis

ROUTLEDGE LIBRARY EDITIONS:
WOMEN'S HISTORY



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1850–1900

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Movement

PATRICIA HOLLIS

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Women in Public 1850–1900

Documents of the Victorian Women's Movement

PATRICIA HOLLIS

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Preface

Despite a scatter of feminist writing in the 1830s and 1840s, the feminist movement in England truly began in the 1850s. It was motivated by three main concerns: the concern with 'surplus women' and their need for work if they were to be self-dependent; a more particular concern with the plight of governesses, which led directly to the movement for women's education; and the increasing awareness of women's status at law, publicised by the case of Caroline Norton, summarised by Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon's *Brief Summary of the Laws*. Not until the 1860s did the demand for the vote become prominent.

It was in the 1850s that women acquired their public heroine in Florence Nightingale, whose work in the Crimea, to quote Anna Jameson, broke through a 'Chinese wall of prejudice'. The movement's first circle of workers came from that courageous and happy group around Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, Emily Davies, Elizabeth Garrett, Maria Rye, Jessie Boucherett; and associated with them Octavia Hill, Helen Taylor, Frances Buss and Dorothea Beale. In 1857 this circle founded their Ladies Institute at Langham Place, in 1858 they published their *English Woman's Journal* (later renamed *Englishwoman's Review*), which was to be the voice of the women's movement until the founding in the 1870s of the *Women's Suffrage Journal* by Lydia Becker and the *Women's Union Journal* by Emma Paterson. Through Isa Craig as assistant secretary, as well as the contributions of Emily Davies and Elizabeth Garrett, they were linked to the Social Science Association, founded in 1857, which did much to 'professionalise' women's public service. And they were to form the first women's suffrage committee when they lined up John Stuart Mill as their parliamentary spokesman in 1867.

Half a century later, by 1900, women had obtained new careers in retailing and commerce, and transformed teaching and nursing as work for women. Women in workshops and factories had acquired a degree of protection, through legislation and combination. Medicine had been opened up as a profession; a network of high schools and women's colleges had been established; and legal changes in custody, property and separation had made major advances towards equity for women at law. The CD campaigns had been an explicitly feminist and highly successful pressure group, by women, for women; and in the fields of politics and public service, women now voted for and served on a wide range of bodies and boroughs. The most significant exception remained the parliamentary vote.

Most prefaces tend to be defensive, and this one is no different. The first defence is of the chronological scope of the book. It attempts to reflect the range of women's public activity from around 1850, when

the movement began, to around 1900, when new figures, most notably the Pankhursts in the suffrage campaign, and Mary Macarthur and Margaret Bondfield in the trade union movement, were to take women into a more militant and confident era. Their work and their generation require a book of their own.

The second defence is of women in *public*. Domestic and marital life, women's health and women's childbearing, have been excluded, partly for reasons of space, but also because the material chosen seeks to illustrate the consciousness of women both of their position and of their claims to a 'wider sphere'.

The third defence is of the somewhat arbitrary nature of the divisions in the book, and the location of certain of its contents. To take one example, the CD campaign was crucially about prostitution (Part 7); but it was also about the status of women at law (Part 6), and was as well a most important Victorian pressure group (Part 9). Nursing, to take another example, has been split between hospital nursing (Part 3) and poor law and district nursing (Part 8) when arguably they should have been kept together.

Most sections contain what I believe to be some of the most significant 'statements' of the period—such as John Stuart Mill's House of Commons speech in 1867, or Caroline Norton's description of the wrongs done to her by law; or W. T. Stead on 'The maiden tribute of modern Babylon', or Beatrice Webb on women and the Factory Acts. They also try to suggest some of the changes in attitudes and aspirations over time. Inevitably there are many omissions, and equally as many pieces condensed that deserve to be reprinted in full. I can only plead lack of space. There is not, as yet, any collection of primary material on the women's movement, and very few reprints, comparable to the material available for studying labour movements and industrial conditions in the nineteenth century. Later books by others will rectify my omissions and abbreviations.

Some particular debts. Of the many libraries I have used, two deserve especial thanks. The skilled and courteous staff at the Fawcett Library (newly located in the City of London Polytechnic) helped me find many of the political pamphlets of the 1870s. And the library staff, particularly the patient inter-library loan staff, of the University of East Anglia allowed me to reach more source material than would otherwise have been accessible to an author confined throughout with a broken leg. To Dr B. H. Harrison of Corpus Christi, Oxford I owe the temperance reference (9.1.3). I would also like to acknowledge permission to quote from Margaret Llewelyn Davies, *Life As We Have Known It*, published by the Hogarth Press; Adelaide Anderson, *Women in the Factory*, published by John Murray; E. Moberley Bell, *Octavia Hill*, and Barbara Stephen, *Emily Davies and Girton College*, both published by Constable.

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