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Women and Citizenship in Britain and Ireland in the Twentieth Century: What Difference did the Vote Make?

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Esther Breitenbach and Pat Thane?s edited collection, *Women and Citizenship in Britain and Ireland in the Twentieth Century* is a timely and very useful addition to the historiography. In 13 carefully-crafted chapters by eminent scholars from the fields of modern history and political science, this volume traces the struggle faced by women for enfranchisement, how women?s position in public life has improved, and how this has impacted on women?s citizenship. The publication of this work is the culmination of many years research and discussion funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Many of the authors have already made significant contributions to the historiography concerning women and the vote, or women?s participation in British politics more generally. Thane has already written extensively on the issue of women?s enfranchisement, and amongst many of her publications is her article ?What difference did the vote make? Women in public and private life in Britain since 1918? ? the topic of her inaugural lecture at the Institute of Historical Research, and later published in the Institute?s journal, *Historical Research*.(1) This volume takes these findings further, and explores the inextricable link between citizenship and enfranchisement for women in 20th-century Britain.

The contribution of this volume to the study of women will undoubtedly be significant for many reasons,

although its biggest strengths lie in how it manages to fill two significant gaps in the historiography. Firstly, it debunks many previous assumptions about women?s lack of interest in politics post-1960 by showing that women actually became more involved, and more vociferous in their campaigns for equality after this period. Secondly, it challenges the previously widely-held assumption of a decline in interest in the feminist movement and women?s activism post-1980, showing that in fact, the feminist movement did not decline, and in some areas strengthened, even though the premiership of Mrs. Thatcher did little to enhance (and in many cases arrested) the development of women?s rights and status in public life. Whilst the historiography of women and the vote is not barren, with the numerous works of June Purvis on the Pankhursts, and Martin Pugh?s studies of the Women?s Movement being two notable examples, this volume breaks new ground in the study of women and political participation. Although some of the issues raised in this volume have already been examined in the historiography, the authors carefully avoid the two overarching extremes that often emerge in previous analyses of women?s status in British history and society - namely the pessimistic assessments of those such as Harold L. Smith (especially in his studies of pay and the political participation of women), or what could be argued as the overly-optimistic assessments of those such as Arthur Marwick, who boldly argued that women were ?emancipated? in the post-Second World War period. Instead, they appear to offer an assessment that lies in the middle-ground, with most concluding that women?s status has steadily improved since 1900 and that this improvement was continuous (although, as Mary E. Daly argues, it now seems to have stagnated in Ireland), yet securing equality in fact and principle has remained elusive in many areas.

Thane?s chapter clearly shows that women have always played a part in British politics in the 20th century, although their influence in the early stages were confined to the richer, aristocratic women ? a position strengthened by the refusal of successive governments at the turn of the 20th century to grant universal suffrage for women. Nevertheless, she shows that women?s groups were active, despite their fluctuating membership in the early years of the century, with the Conservative Primrose League and the Women?s Labour League being influential. Women were even involved in issues such as the improvement in family and property law, and seeking better education opportunities for all. Many issues were mixed-sex issues, although women?s involvement was clear from the outset. Furthermore, she challenges the long-held assumption that women favoured the Conservative party in their voting behaviour, citing the election results of the inter-war years as an indication of women favouring the Labour and Liberal parties. Additionally, Thane argues that the male-dominated House of Commons valued the contribution of its female members, despite their low numbers, although as we know from contemporary works by female MPs such as Ellen Wilkinson and Eleanor Rathbone, securing the respect of male members proved difficult for women in a male-dominated House. Women?s role and influence in both party and non-party politics increased, and the proliferation of women?s groups during the 1930s and beyond attests to their greater contribution, and if nothing else, greater participation in public life. Although the achievements of women?s groups were greatly inhibited by the effects of the two world wars, it is clear, especially during the Second World War, that the growing strength and importance of women acted as a means to force government to improve women?s position in Britain?s social, political and public life.

One of the most impressive chapters in this book is Lowri Newman?s analysis of Labour Women?s Sections in South Wales in the interwar years. The paucity of the historiography on this period, and the fact that Welsh women?s history only became a matter for scholarly debate from the mid-1980s, a debate that intensified after the publication of Deirdre Beddoe?s *Out of the Shadows* (2) showed that the historiography of Welsh women was probably the least-developed of all the British nations. However, Newman gives a majestic account of the Labour Party women?s group, and how women played a significant part in improving not only the lives of fellow women, but also men. It shows how women became an important part within the larger Labour Party framework on a local level, navigating through the dominant patriarchal values, and ensuring that they balanced work and family commitments in the performance of their duties. Although some elements of their contribution were still clearly influenced by gender (such as the expectation of women to organise refreshments at political meetings) their contribution, and possibly most significantly, the realisation of the male members that whilst some issues needed to be fought on gender lines, many other issues could be fought more effectively if women were accepted and encouraged into the political process.

Newman stresses that the role of women on a local level was highly influential, and although she does not refer to the contribution of women to the unemployment clubs in the South Wales valleys established in response to the unemployment created by the 1926 General Strike (which began with the work of the English Quaker, Emma Noble and her husband William, later supported by local Labour groups, and largely maintained by many valleys women), she elucidates many of the issues hitherto only touched upon by a handful of historians, of which Dot Jones and Neil Evans are the most prominent, and offers new evidence of this period that will undoubtedly prove fruitful in furthering the debate about the importance of women in this area of Welsh (and indeed British) public life.

Catriona Burness?s chapter on women in Scottish politics reveals that the biggest challenge for the country was to get more women involved in politics, although the concerted efforts of the nationalists and the Labour Party ensured that despite Scotland?s traditionally low return of female MPs to Westminster, women?s interest in politics could be maintained. Indeed, women?s platform proved to be the political rallies, where women were specifically asked to speak in order to attract larger crowds, although those who made it into the political arena struggled to balance their family commitments with their professional role. Burness cites the election of mother-of-five Jean Mann at the age of 56 as an example typifying the belief that women with young children would struggle to perform effectively as public figures if they needed to contend with the stresses and strains of raising a young family. Many of the themes identified by Burness are elucidated in Breitenbach?s chapter on Scottish Women?s Organisations, which highlights their importance and role in Scottish society, the difficulties they encountered, but most importantly the fact that feminist politics remained an issue throughout the interwar years and beyond. This has recently been argued by Valerie Wright in her unpublished PhD thesis on the women?s movement in Scotland in the inter-war years. Breitenbach contributes to this debate by showing that women were active in several spheres of Scottish life ? in politics, religious and philanthropic groups. The inextricable link between the aforementioned spheres and citizenship is demonstrated by Breitenbach, who argues that women?s desire to improve their position in Scottish society emanated from their will to take positive action through the formation of women?s societies, or working within the prevailing male-dominated framework to facilitate change. This chapter, especially in its analysis of women in Scottish local government, draws heavily on primary sources owing to the lack of previous historical analysis of this facet of Scottish political life.

Mary E. Daly offers a more sobering assessment of women in Irish politics, highlighting the fact that women have, and continue to be, underrepresented in national politics. Furthermore, she suggests that this shows very little sign of changing, especially in the near future, when general election results have continued to return few female candidates. Despite their low representation, this cannot be correlated with the previously perceived notion that women were not interested in politics. Indeed, the history of the Irish women?s movement and feminism had long roots, going back to the latter half of the 19th century. Daly argues that the politicisation of Ireland in this period was burgeoned by Ireland?s membership of the United Kingdom, together with the arrival in politics of the widows of war veterans, who were returned to Parliament unopposed. The advent of second wave feminism in the 1970s increased women?s presence in Irish politics, although Daly argues that its impact was inhibited by the fact that the major parties, namely Fianna Fail and Fine Gael, had a limited understanding of feminism and the feminist movement. Daly claims that the underrepresentation of women was attributable to the presence of these two main political parties with very few ideological differences, and a proportional representation electoral system representing multi-seat constituencies. Although evidence has suggested that proportional representation favours women, this is normally only true for the list system (as seen in the Welsh Assembly) in which more women are selected for office. Despite these difficulties, it would appear that these problems provided a vacuum within which a strong and active women?s movement could develop in Ireland. This is analysed in more detail by Lindsay Earner-Byrne, who describes how religion provided a platform for women to gather support in Ireland, with feminist activists calling for unity among Irish women in response to the moral threats created by the passage of the 1918 Representation of the People Act. Through the development of suffrage groups, Irish women lobbied effectively for change, and raised awareness of their issues. Earner-Byrne claims that the effectiveness of women could not purely be measured by votes, and that their presence and activism on a voluntary level was a good measure of women?s political consciousness and impact on wider society. She

concludes that despite the complexity of the Irish women?s movement, and the desire of historians to place Ireland in an international context, the Irish women?s movement can be regarded as a unifying force, even though different groups campaigned on different issues. This chapter complements Daly?s work, showing that although women?s political representation in Parliament has been low, this does not overshadow their effectiveness and importance on a local and voluntary level.

Myrtle Hill and Margaret Ward highlight the complexities faced by Northern Ireland women in their struggle for the vote and for political recognition. The problems brought about by religious divides and tensions are outlined in detail, demonstrating that these, in addition to the prevailing dominance of men in Northern Irish politics were another complicating factor affecting the ability of women?s voices being heard. Furthermore, the relationship between Northern Ireland and the central government in London has continued to arrest not only the position of women in Northern Irish public life, but also the development of the region itself. It is within this context that women have had to operate in Northern Ireland ? a difficult and restricting framework that suggests women?s position in public life will develop at a slower pace than in other nations in the United Kingdom. Although this is somewhat pessimistic, it is possible to see why Hill and Ward come to this conclusion. Even in post-devolution Northern Ireland, where the Labour government gave the region more autonomy over their political administration, the Northern Ireland Assembly has experienced a troubled existence, and while it appears to be functioning better now, the problems of religious and political differences always mean that its foundations are not as solid as the devolved institutions in Scotland and Wales. One could argue that women?s position in Northern Irish public life could not be fully addressed until the religious and political divides of Northern Ireland are fully resolved, which will undoubtedly take some considerable time, especially owing to the slow pace and progress of the various peace proposals offered by successive governments to the region.

Rosie Campbell and Sarah Childs demonstrate how significant attitudinal changes within the major political parties have influenced the participation and growth of women at the elite level of British politics. Citing the image problems of the Conservative Party in the pre-Cameron era, they show how Cameron, after his election as party leader, actively sought to attract more women into the party, and indeed promoted many of his Conservative women MPs to senior positions. Nevertheless, this, as the authors show, was not a new phenomenon, especially since Tony Blair, upon taking office in 1997, included a high number of women in his first Cabinet (who were later termed by the media as the ?Blair Babes?). Their findings agree with earlier works by David Denver which show that women?s partisan alignment is significantly less than men?s, and that predicting their voting behaviour at elections is much more difficult. Although Campbell and Childs conclude that women?s position in British political life is still influenced by gendered factors, it is clear that their position is improving, and that the once all-inhibiting factor of gender is now becoming less marked.

Later chapters examine the role and development of women in the devolved institutions of Wales and Scotland. Scholars including David Denver, James Mitchell, Laura McCallister, Richard Wyn Jones, Roger Scully, Duncan Tanner and Dafydd Trystan have made significant contributions to the study of the devolved institutions, but their references to women, and their increasing status in the devolved assemblies and parliaments have frequently been contextualised within the wider studies of voting behaviour, the institutions? evolving powers, tensions between the centre and the periphery, together with the troubles of coalition politics. The works in this volume by Esther Breitenbach, Fiona Mackay, Paul Cheney, Nickie Charles and Meryl Kenny offer a detailed analysis of women?s position in post-devolution Wales and Scotland which was hitherto absent in the historiography, and show that women?s participation in these institutions ensured that their concerns are addressed, and that women?s contribution to the debate and the policy agenda is significant. Brian Harrison?s seminal article on the contribution of female Members of Parliament from 1919?45 (3) shows that women, primarily owing to their lower numbers but also, arguably, because of their lower status in society, had their contribution to the policy agenda inhibited in this period. The much more visible and vocal contribution of women in the political arena today could reflect not only an improvement in their social status, but an increased confidence and belief in their ability to effect change and contribute to public life. Although these changes, and the increased participation of women, especially

in Wales (as Paul Cheney shows) came as a result of significant disagreement and a struggle for public acceptance, the Welsh Assembly is now one of the most representative institutions in the Western world with regard to the percentage of female members. This, in itself, could be regarded as a triumph for modern democracy and the position of women within it. However, as Breitenbach and Mackay identify, the proliferation of multi-level governance in the UK has also brought about its problems for female representation, much of which has been complicated by the absence of a clear definition and ideology of the pre-existing feminist groups of their aims and objectives. Whilst Cheney shows that this has not been such a problem in Wales, it would appear that these tensions exist in Scotland, which explains why the path of women to power there has not been so easy. Nevertheless, as Mackay and Kenny show[where? Isn?t a reference needed? Or does he mean Mackay and Breitenbach?], the significant numbers of women in Scottish politics today could be considered as an achievement of devolution, although the foundations of these achievements remain shaky. It is difficult to ascertain whether this was coincidental or intended. One of the most influential figures in pushing the devolution debate, the late Labour leader John Smith, was not explicit about his vision of the position of women in a devolved Scotland, and Mark Stuart?s highly acclaimed biography of Smith does not shed any further light on this issue.(4) While current research does not reveal whether it was clearly the intention of devolution to improve the representation of women in Scottish public life, the important fact, as Mackay and Kenny show is that the situation for women is improving in Scotland, although it is unclear whether this improvement could be sustained. The story is somewhat different for Wales, as Cheney shows. The women?s movement in Wales was much less developed (as demonstrated in Newman?s earlier chapter) which gives the impression that the improvement in women?s status in Wales acts as a stark contrast to other devolved nations. However, as Cheney notes, many of the factors affecting this included the presence of the proportional representation system. Furthermore, as Richard Wyn Jones and Roger Scully have previously argued, voters turned away from Labour in the 1999 Assembly elections and switched allegiances to Plaid Cymru, who had many women on their regional and constituency lists, thus boosting female representation. In 2003, when many voters returned to Labour, they too now saw the benefits and advantages of promoting more female candidates, even though this proposal (which infamously became known as ?twinning?) remains highly controversial in some quarters.(5)

Nickie Charles writes persuasively about the policy divergence in Wales concerning domestic violence. She shows how the debate pertaining to domestic violence in Wales has now been moved to gender-neutral territory, which has had both positive and negative effects. It has opened the door for men who have been abused by their wives to obtain help through refuge groups, but conversely, this has reduced the provision for women ? the people who have traditionally suffered from this abuse. She shows how the Welsh Assembly have differed in their interpretation of domestic violence, and how this has changed the way in which this phenomenon has been treated in Wales. Furthermore, she highlights that the first refuge movement was not established in Wales until 1975, which indicates the struggle faced by women for public recognition of their ill-treatment. While there have been improvements for women in this area, it is still clear that much work remains to be done to ensure that women can be protected, even though many in the Welsh Assembly, especially Jane Hutt AM, have done considerable work in this area to facilitate greater resources and protection for women.

This collection makes a significant contribution to the historiography, but as Breitenbach and Thane state in their introduction the problems that continue to surround the availability of archival material in this area mean that this volume, despite its ambitious aims, cannot provide a definitive account of this period. However, in their discussion of issues concerning equality, the authors deliver a well-balanced approach which deviates from the conclusions offered in most of the prevailing historiography, and their findings will undoubtedly provide the basis for further debate and discussion on these issues. The reader will certainly understand significantly more about the struggle for female suffrage and its consequent impact after reading this volume.

Notes

1. Pat Thane, ?What difference did the vote make? Women in public and private life in Britain since 1918?, *Historical Research*, Historical Research 76, 192 (2003), 268?85.Back to (1)
2. Deirdre Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows: A History of Women in Twentieth-Century Wales* (Cardiff, 2001). Back to (2)
3. Brian Harrison, ?Women in a men's house: the women M.P.s, 1919?1945?**,** *The Historical Journal*, 29, 3 (September 1986), 623?54.Back to (3)
4. Mark Stuart, *John Smith: A Life* (London, 1995).Back to (4)
5. Richard Wyn Jones and Roger Scully, ?Coming home to Labour? The 2003 Welsh Assembly elections?, *Regional and Federal Studies*, (2003),125?32.Back to (5)

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