The Political Worlds of Women: Gender and Politics in 19th-Century Britain

In recent years, historians have begun to explore the political experiences of Victorian women outside the well-trodden suffrage narrative. As a consequence, we have a far greater understanding of how certain women were able to negotiate, exploit and overcome the legal and ideological constraints society placed upon them. Sarah Richardson's research has played an important part in these debates, and her latest book, *The Political Worlds of Women*, is a significant contribution to this emerging historiography.

The traditional focus point for historians interested in female political activity in the 19th century has been the legal and ideological exclusions women faced in local and national politics. Rather than focusing on the restrictions women faced, Richardson actively seeks to chart 'positive evidence of female agency in a counter-narrative' (p. 1). This counter-narrative explores how women were able to exchange, negotiate and contribute to established political systems. The majority of the women explored here were part of the developing middle class, whose political ideology was at its zenith for the chronological period covered by the book (c. 1789–1890). This class identity does not mask or overwhelm the religious and geographical diversity of the women studied, a diversity which is strengthened by the differing ages, life experience and wealth of the individuals considered. To explore the breadth and depth of the political activities these women undertook, Richardson utilises a huge variety of source material. Familiar sources, such as Hansard, poll books, and political papers, as well as less conventional sources, including recipe books and travel literature, are re-read and re-evaluated for evidence of female political participation. These are placed

alongside letters, memoirs, autobiographies and diaries to piece together a lost world of female political activity. This activity is divided into four broad (but connecting) sections in the book: home life, local politics, national politics, and international affairs.

Part one starts at the beginning of life, with childhood and childrearing in politically active households. As Richardson highlights, the private world of the home, and more specifically, how children were brought up, is often overlooked by political historians. Although biographers of male politicians often start with their subjects' education (usually, but not always, a private school followed by Oxbridge), we know very little about the ordinary political experiences of children growing up in 19th-century Britain. Richardson brings to life these political worlds. We learn about children who were encouraged to read and learn about political economy, history and philosophy. Through the letters, diaries and memoirs of both children and parents, it is revealed that political events, from local elections to national campaigns, were often popular topics for conversation. For those parents seeking a more structured education for their offspring, publications such as *Evenings at Home* were on hand to guide families through varied subject matter. The picture Richardson paints is not one of the home being a private sanctuary from the outside public world, but a space where the intimate and the political mingled seamlessly together.

This picture is enhanced by the discussion of political activity within activists' houses. Meetings, parties and salons all took place within the four walls of home, where women often used their kitchen tables and drawing rooms to organise petitions, host committee meetings and plan campaigns. Even the everyday could be defined by ideological considerations: during the campaigns against slavery, the type of sugar in your cupboard could be an important declaration. As the century wore on, the relationship between the domestic economy and political debates was strengthened by the rise of the domestic advice book. As Richardson demonstrates, publications such as Mrs William Parke's *Domestic Duties* (1825) and Eliza Acton's *Modern Cookery for Private Families* (1845) provide an important insight into the interplay between gender, ethnicity and nationhood. Richardson leaves us with the impression that for politically active families, the home (especially the middle-class home) was a formative site of political action.

Part two looks beyond the home and into community politics, focusing on the philanthropic economy and parish politics. On the topic of the philanthropic activity of middle-class women, Richardson makes an important departure from previous research. Instead of viewing philanthropy as an extension of the home and domestic experience, it is argued that women acted out of ideological impulse. Women were not just practitioners but contributors to the intellectual debates about the role and purpose of philanthropy. To illustrate this point, Richardson draws on female writers who were actively involved in the intellectual debates about philanthropy and the political economy. This discussion includes well-known names, like Harriet Martineau and Jane Marcet, but also the lesser known Harriet Grote and Margracia Loudon. Here Richardson's examples support her assertion that philanthropy should not be seen as a 'soft option' for women excluded from formal politics (p. 81). The argument that community politics was neither a 'distraction or compensation' is further strengthened by the discussion of politics in the parish (p. 80). Although the legislative changes brought in throughout the century increased participation, it is clear from Richardson's discussion that from early on women were able to take part in local politics. The findings here are significant. A poll book from 1843 offers a unique picture of women participating in the election of an assistant overseer for the parish of St Chad in Lichfield. It is an important piece of evidence, which suggests that women from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, including paupers, participated in the election. It demonstrates that while women were legally excluded from the national franchise, the reality of political participation, especially at local level, was far more complicated and owed a great deal to long-established customs. As Richardson demonstrates, historians need to take more account of the politics of the parish when considering female political citizenship in the long 19th century.

It is, perhaps, on the national stage that female exclusion has been presumed to be most pronounced. Women were officially excluded from the national franchise in the 1832 Reform Act and for some historians this constitutional restriction has stood as a reflection of political reality. In part three of *The Political Worlds of Women*, Richardson challenges the idea that the national political stage was occupied by male actors alone. This is done through two separate examples: petitioning and the Ladies' Gallery in the Houses of Parliament.

Signing and presenting petitions had long been an established form of political engagement. The 19th century witnessed a revival of this political action, with over six million people participating in the activity in 1842. Here, Richardson contends that as 'parliamentary politics grew more exclusive and formalised women looked to an older form of interaction with the state' (p. 126). This dramatic rise in the use of petitions presents an important source to 'gauge women's interaction with national politics' (p. 155). Here, discussion fits into wider scholarship which has served to highlight female petitioning in movements such as Anti-Slavery, the repeal of the Corn Laws, and the repeal of the Poor Law Amendment Act. While these 'monster petitions' attracted a great deal of support from politically active women, Richardson's statistical evidence highlights that issues that directly affected the everyday lives of women were also popular subjects for petitioning. Some of these petitions, like female opposition to the Miners and Collieries Bill, might prove a fruitful topic for further research. As Richardson recognises, female petitioning did not always pass uncontested, yet writing, organising and signing petitions gave women the opportunity to assert their political citizenship in the public sphere.

While petitioning gave women the opportunity to start a conversation with the Houses of Parliament, the Ventilator and the Ladies' Gallery allowed them to observe the debates playing out. During the long 18th century, the admission of women to Parliament as spectators was contested and debated. In the early 19th century, a compromise was reached. A limited number of women could listen to debates in the Commons – in the Ventilator, a roof space designed primarily to carry away heat and smoke from the chandelier below. It was not an inviting space, but there were frequent queues for the 25 spaces. Watching proceedings in the House of Lords was a more pleasant affair. In the 1820s, John Soane designed a Ladies' Gallery, where women could sit and watch proceedings. These arrangements came to a sudden end on the night of 14 October 1834. The fire, which destroyed much of the Houses of Parliament, re-opened the debate about female presence. A committee was established, and resolved that a quarter of the Stranger's Gallery would be set apart for a Ladies' Gallery, which would be screened by trelliswork. As Richardson points out, the concealment of women visiting the House of Commons had been taken by some to be a powerful symbol of female exclusion. Yet, as her discussion reveals, the relationship between the female observers and the male Members was more complex than simple segregation. For women, the decision to attend, and where to sit, was often a highly politicised choice. By the 1870s, the debate about the Ladies Gallery began to reflect contemporary concerns about national identity, with the gallery increasingly referred to as an architectural version of purdah. Richardson has opened the door onto the relationship between women and the Houses of Parliament. Here, the discussion moves too quickly. It would, for instance, be interesting to know how Members and observers interacted at times when the status of the Ladies Gallery was not being contested, and where women sat when Parliament had decamped after the fire. There is, for instance, a contemporary description of Lord Palmerston climbing up to kiss his wife after his famous Don Pacifico Speech in 1850, suggesting that women were allowed to view events in the House of Commons while it was in its temporary location.

In the final part of the book, Richardson casts her eye further afield to the political experiences of women abroad. In 1815, as the final peace of Vienna was being finalised, Europe opened its doors to visitors. British women were among the many who took advantage of the peaceful continent and its corridors to the world beyond. Individual motivation for travel was varied: some sought economic opportunities, some accompanied their husbands on professional postings (normally diplomatic), while others saw Europe as a land fit to pursue ideological objectives. Whatever their initial motivations for leaving Britain, many of the women Richardson illuminates found themselves encountering local, national and international politics. Nowhere is this more striking than in the experiences of those women whose husbands were employed in the diplomatic service. The nature of diplomacy is characterised here as a world of 'social politics', a

characterisation adopted from Elaine Chalus' work on 18th-century aristocratic women. The examples drawn on here (the five wives of British envoys to Persia between 1815 and 1853, Frances Vane, Marchioness of Londonderry, and Senora Calderon de la Barca) go some way to exploring this world. It is, however, a world that needs much more study. Historians (diplomatic and gender) do not know nearly enough about the activities and experiences of wives, daughters and sisters who accompanied their husbands on postings to Europe, the Empire and the wider world. Of course, accompanying male relatives was not the only way women were able to travel the globe in the Victorian age. Richardson highlights a number of individuals who left Britain independently, often motivated by ideological considerations: Charlotte Anley travelled to Australia to investigate the condition of women prisoners; Clara Lowe and Annie Macpherson promoted emigration as a solution to child poverty and deprivations; Sarah Austin sought economic independence alongside relative intellectual freedom; and many women were inspired to travel to the Italian peninsula to participate, however they could, in the Rosewater Revolution. Here, Richardson does well to illuminate the complexity of female experience, and the constant and uneven interplay between religion, ideology, class, locality and gender.

I have only a small criticism of the book. The structure is built around particular examples of female political activism. This episodic approach can leave the reader a little unsure of the overall connections and conclusions. This problem is most pronounced in the final two sections of the book. These sections, it should be noted, correspond with the largest gaps in our understanding of female political activity. Nevertheless, Richardson succeeds in reconstructing new worlds for historians, and she has mapped out the terrain well.

In *The Political Worlds of Women*, Richardson presents a vivid picture, full of intelligent, driven, and interesting women who have been previously ignored or over-looked. The realities of political life come alive, from the young girl who names her kittens after the architects of the 1832 Reform Bill (Lord Brougham and Lord Grey) to conversations in Richard Cobden's drawing room. The impression left is that the relationship between gender and politics in 19th-century Britain was a complex and complicated one. Richardson successfully demonstrates that certain women were able to exercise significant influence and act with relative degrees of autonomy. It leaves scholars with an invitation to burrow further into the political worlds of women in Victorian Britain.

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