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The Feminine Public Sphere: Middle-Class Women in Civic Life in Scotland c.1870?1914

Review Number:
999
Publish date:
Monday, 1 November, 2010
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ISBN:
9780719079665
Date of Publication:
2009
Price:
£55.00
Pages:
192pp.
Publisher:
Manchester University Press
Place of Publication:
Manchester
Reviewer:
Malcolm Noble

In 1886 the Glasgow Prayer Union (GPU) remembered in their customary prayers a woman across whom one of its ?ladies? had come. She had been ?found lying very drunk near Cattle Market with young infant?. Concerned for the infant?s life, the unnamed philanthropist (not a word Smitley uses) takes the child to the nearby police station, ?where the woman was also taken? (p. 44). This raises a number of questions. Other than the appeal of playing the Good Samaritan, what possessed that GPU member to assume moral authority and judge what was happening? Clearly this question extends beyond the simple biblical connotations of the Good Samaritan. What late-Victorian set of political and social institutions permitted this lady to wander the streets and collect infants at risk to handover to the state? Smitley?s book unpicks the context underpinning this event, and looks critically at a feminine public sphere in late-Victorian (1870?1914) Scotland. Of course the scope of the book is much greater than this single incident, and encompasses a huge amount of female activity. However, this event provides a useful focus for Smitley?s wider thesis.

One of Smitley?s central arguments, and one which explains the above intervention in the street, is that through participation in a range of institutions, including not just local government but also philanthropic organizations and the reform movement, women were included in the public sphere and participated in the production of civic identity. Inextricable from this process were religious communities and networks, created

as belief compelled the faithful to enter Christian service: to save not only themselves, but the unfortunates whom they met around them. In addition, Smitley uncovers the role of these temperance and Liberal institutions in seeking female enfranchisement. The link between these two movements was a peculiarly Scottish one, as temperance movements desperately sought influence over local government with the sole aim of achieving prohibition. Despite being cast in the negative light of single-issue politics, this strategy represented an intelligent response from a group with limited direct influence. Finally, Smitley explores the significance of these movements in a British context and argues strongly that the impact of the temperance movement on the campaign for Scottish female suffrage was that it introduced heterogeneity into the British model, as the Scottish experience deviated from the English one.

A feminine public sphere is not presented as a given, and in the introduction it is explained as it is constructed.

> ?The notion of the feminine public sphere is based on the active participation of women in the formation of a middle-class identity which was derived from a commitment to civic life and public service? (p. 3).

This in part takes up the feminist critique that the development of the public sphere had a tendency to marginalize women. Smitley reintroduces women to the public sphere, through the reappraisal of which activities and institutions ought to be encompassed within in it. Specifically in this context, bringing women into the public sphere by including activities such as what we would term philanthropy. This notions underpinning this feminine public sphere are not radical. It was accepted and even expected that middle-class women should attend to what they perceived to be the needs of poor women and children. This was central to a lot of philanthropic endeavours. Whilst the term philanthropy is not one used by Smitley very much, clearly much of the works discussed in this book can reasonably be described as such: the idea of philanthropy is closely aligned with that of public service. This is presumably done to highlight the political nature of this associational culture. In part it moves away from the excellent work on 19th-century female philanthropy, including Frank Poocashka on English and Maria Luddy on Irish experiences of this. With a good deal of success Smitley moves the focus from charity and looks at the politics which underpinned it, as part of a female civic culture. Charity is implicitly political: the first decision to be made is whom to help, with what resources, and on what grounds. Smitley?s work means that the charitable institutions themselves may be considered political ones too. Yet all these philanthropic-cum-political organizations allowed this female participation through what was essentially an extension of the motherhood role: this was used as a discreet mechanism through which women were able to engage in politics in a non-confrontational fashion.

Throughout the 19th century temperance became deeply political as groups of women, mobilized in the same way they had against slavery, exerting female control over consumption. The aim was to encourage the boycotting of alcohol in the same way emancipationists had discouraged the serving of sugar, by rendering it a major *faux pas*. This regulation of domestic consumption took place partly in the home, and partly in public, in the shops and streets into which female shoppers had to venture. It was mediated and supported through the temperance leagues, such as the Scottish Temperance League, the British Women?s Temperance Association, and the British Women?s Temperance Association Scottish Christian Union. Smitley separates temperance efforts into two groups: moral suasion, and legal suasion. Moral suasion was attempted on an individual basis. It included the breakfast schemes, the catering tents and countless other small exercises. The legal prohibition of alcohol, however, was obviously a much more substantial goal. In 1881, Scottish female ratepayers were enfranchised, and so began to petition and campaign strongly in favour of this. By pressing candidates on temperance issues, and promising political support or opposition at the ballot box accordingly, temperance became both a major political issue and a major political force. With the removal of the marriage disqualification from the franchise in 1894, one which was brought to bear.

The discussion on databases clearly has its origins in the methodology section of the thesis. One weakness is a lack of attempt to explain, methodologically, the significance a Java system for querying MySQL has over

other systems (p. 34). Or indeed, for the majority of readers, what it is. This is a shame as many historians might have enjoyed lengthier exposition. Some data and notes are given in appendices two to six. History, as a discipline, too often makes poor use of available technology. At the beginning Smitley also outlines the various extant sources, the combination of annual reports, publications including newsletters, and minute books, which formed the majority of the sources used in the book. It is never easy to balance different kinds of sources for each institution when comparing them, but undoubtedly this is something in which Smitley is successful.

One thing with which any reader will have to struggle is a number of mind boggling acronyms. While Smitley?s use is restrained, they are slightly hard work, not because many are used, indeed, fewer than 20 are used, but they are lengthy, and at times quite similar. For example, BWTA is the British Women?s Temperance Association, and BWTASCU the British Women?s Temperance Association Scottish Christian Union. This is not a problem which would be solved by inserting the full names, as this would render the text lengthy and unwieldy. Contemporaries would have managed with an elided ?Association?. The important point to note in this regard, is that the associations are not necessarily as competitive or factional as the similar but different names suggest.

The Scottish Women?s Liberal Federation (SWLF) had a complex structure too. Founded in 1891, the composition of the organization largely reflected the mental geography of Scotland: there were Edinburgh and Glasgow divisions, and the local units, Women?s Liberal Associations joined the larger group on payment of annual subscriptions. These were not all limited to the middles classes: from 1870 to 1914 the presidents of the SWLF tended to come from aristocratic backgrounds. Indeed, mirroring the Liberal Association, the presidents, rather than patronesses, were the wives of the Secretary of State for Scotland. This is a solid, worked example, that the social and political elite of the country formed part of one of these organizations. The work would have been made stronger with some deep analysis of the social makeup of the actors involved. Whilst few might have been employed, what were their husbands? occupations? How far down the social spectrum did these organizations go? Did officers tend to belong to a certain social grouping? This is particularly interesting in a context of increasing professionalization.

Professionalism, something which became increasingly important and necessary in so many areas of public life and commercial activity in this late Victorian and Edwardian period, is also important to the female public sphere as defined by Smitley. For the women, it was the difference between being perceived as ?quasi-professional public servants rather than as bored, amateur, busy-bodies seeking to regulate the lives of poorer women? (p. 66). The discussion of men as professionals is highly unremarkable historically, yet a good deal more interesting when applied to those to whom, traditionally, access to the civic sphere in which such professional activities took place had been denied or restricted. Moreover, if we turn back to the incident in Glasgow cattle market in 1886, with which this review opened, we can start to understand how these women felt empowered to intervene. Stooping to collect the baby might have been an act of Christian charity, playing the Good Samaritan, or perhaps simply common sense. Yet through dedication to public service, it also became a professional intervention. This is given greater credence if we remind ourselves there were no social services at this juncture. To the lady?s mind, however, it was not a question of anything other than the professional duty as a member of the GPU, or another organization.

The volume is at its most lively when it is dealing with those things which are easiest to visualize. One such highly-visual element was the discussion of the British Women?s Temperance Association Scottish Christian Union attempt to lure people away from the pub. Temperance, after all, was about getting people to not drink. The Stirling Branch ran a tent at the Highland and Agricultural Society show. This wooden shed offered a restaurant-style service and a takeaway at opposite ends, with the kitchen in the middle. Blue and white were order of the day, with banners, dresses and flowers coordinating. The ladies, working as waitresses, employed hands for the kitchen. Clearly, noblesse oblige only went so far. Likewise the GPU tent in 1905 ran along similar lines. These temperance catering operations served dual roles: firstly, in some cases to make a profit, and more practically, to keep people away from the temptation to drink. This was not just nice luncheons for the well-heeled, as ?early breakfasts were served to the drovers and stall keepers?. Run like middle-class homes, these tents required vast efforts and labour. By affording an opportunity to

demonstrate domestic skills and a willingness to work, Smitley argues, young middle-class ladies could not only socialise, but ?launch a public career?. The women could partake in public service, without deviating from gender roles and domestic ideologies. This is what made the feminine public so useful and so powerful.

Given the extent to which alcohol lubricated almost every conceivable aspect of Victorian middle-class life, temperance reformers had their work cut out in stopping people drinking. Clearly occasional refreshment tents were simply not enough. Using the same skills and exercising the same domestic power, the ladies were encouraged to banish alcohol from their own tables and kitchens. There are obvious parallels to draw with the way sugar was banished from tea tables in the struggle for abolition. Again women were exerting domestic control. However, the offering of sugar was hardly identical to the tradition of hospitality, and the offering of alcoholic beverages to guests. Margaret Black, a lecturer in Domestic Economy, offered dry recipes, and discouraged abstainers who offered drink to guests. Household arrangements, including the provision of refreshments were a traditional female responsibility, so it was relatively easy for women to use their leverage in the home and banish drink altogether: both as wives and mothers. At public events too, alcohol was central to proceedings. It is hard to imagine the civic dinners without copious amounts of claret flowing. On the basis of having removed alcohol from their own homes, these highly-organized ladies applied serious pressure to make sure it was removed from town halls and public functions too.

However it was not just preventative action with which the temperance unions were concerned. The British Women?s Temperance Association Scottish Christian Union ran female inebriate homes. These operated at the opposite end of the temperance scale, and, moreover, relate to criminality, morality and getting others to follow the good example set in the sober bourgeois dining rooms. These were no radical departure, and similar operations cared for prostitutes and children. One scheme which sought very directly to prevent repeat offending was the free breakfast scheme. In a professional fashion, on the day of release, inmates were met at the prison gates, and given a complimentary breakfast. If they consented, they were admitted to an institution. Whilst there were no legal powers for detention, those admitted were very far from free to leave. Whitevale, run by BWTASCU in Glasgow was walled and original clothing was retained by the home?s authorities.

One of the reasons this book is so interesting and bound to be of importance is that it draws out the activities of these women from the individual societies and the realm of philanthropy into a feminised public sphere. In so doing, they become more meaningful and important, with value beyond the sum of their individual merits. Just as women were able to gain agency by accessing this female public sphere, so Smitley has empowered the associations and actors within it outwith, enabling them to assert themselves politically.

It is not, in the book, discussed at any great length, how meetings within these individual institutions functioned: this would be very difficult to uncover unless noted in the minutes, perhaps as location or perhaps in thanks for hospitality. However we might guess that this is a very polite affair. Church-based friendships and associations seem to the arteries through which this culture ran: ?Similarly networks of faithful appear as important for women?s public careers as those of locality? (p.47). It was through feminine drawing rooms and tea parties that this public sphere was created and enacted. The gentle clink of fine bone china is as much its sound as any kind of polemic. Smitley?s achievement is to recover the political from amongst these afternoon teas and ?do-goodery?. Instead of simply intruding into the domestic affairs of others.

To this end, this book is a useful one. Based on meticulous study of a good range of sources, it provides a useful prism through which to view the activity of women in late Victorian and Edwardian Scotland, and indeed may be practicably useful in other places and at earlier times. Even without the gains of female political rights, it may well have some currency in considering earlier 19th-century female associational activity. The female public sphere offers a way in which historians can consider the spread of democracy and the distribution of political rights and agency. Moreover it helps explain quite a lot about what these associations achieved ? not in terms of their individual agendas, but in terms of a much bigger story of women?s liberation and participation in political cultures. Smitley has taken a long, hard look at these associations and considered what they mean through this lens: others are bound to follow.

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