

the policy of facilitating dealings with land are, I think, sufficiently met by the unhesitating and increasing support which the measure received from an association presided over by the Duke of Leinster, and embracing many of the leading proprietors and capitalists of Ireland. It is satisfactory to know that the gentlemen who, as members of the committee representing that body, took the most responsible and active part in its deliberations and action, have justified their convictions by recording their own Parliamentary Titles—a step which has also been taken by many others, among whom I may particularly mention the Lord Justice of Appeal (Christian). Surely, therefore, it may be assumed that the landed proprietors of this country know their real interests, and believe these will be served by a measure intended and calculated to render dealings with land secure, easy, and inexpensive. A system which has to struggle into life against great difficulties and a professional opposition, more often silently exercised than openly avowed, requires all the assistance which the continued exertions of its chief supporters, and the diffusion of information through the press can afford. I trust that the respect felt for the old and useful Society I have the honor of addressing, will insure the general circulation of the facts and views now laid before you. I know these statements are well founded, and I am convinced that they require to be made widely known, in order to secure to the public of Ireland the undoubted and great advantages of that indispensable supplement to the Landed Estates' Court—the Record of Title.

---

VII.—*The Propriety of conceding the Elective Franchise to Women.*—

By Alfred Webb, Esq.

[Read Friday, 20th December, 1867]

IN *The Spectator* of the 24th of March, last year, when Mr. Gladstone's reform bill was under consideration, and much was said and written respecting the extension of the franchise to working men, a letter appeared from which I make the following extract :—

“ Labouring under the misfortune of not being a working man, I yet flatter myself with the fond belief that I may claim to be a ‘rational moral being,’ and I know (alas ! too well !) that I have reached double the age when the law fixes for such beings the era of political majority. I possess some little property,—say about twenty times as much as it is proposed shall confer the franchise in a borough ;—it is needless to add that I pay taxes of various kinds, and am keenly alive to the interests of the augmentation or diminution of that upon income. This epistle will prove to you than I can write, and afford some presumption that I can also read. Being, as above confessed, no working man, I am indeed rather tempted to employ my leisure, instead of laying bricks or making shoes, in reading my *Times* every morning, my *Pall Mall*

every evening, and my *Spectator*, *Saturday Review*, and some dozen other papers and magazines on publication. Having travelled half over Europe and the East, I have had the advantage also of reading in their original tongues the newspapers of several other countries, and I have been fortunate enough to enjoy the intercourse of statesmen and politicians of many lands. My own small lucubrations on social matters are very frequently found worthy of admission into some leading periodicals. Under all these circumstances I beg to repeat my question—why do not the arguments of the friends of Reform apply to me? If rationality and moral freedom constitute the basis of political right, I believe it will be conceded I am a rational and a moral free agent. If property and taxpaying constitute such rights, I have property and I pay taxes. If information and leisure to form opinion are the qualities required to enable an individual to perform such functions with benefit to the State, I humbly submit I possess those qualifications at least in an equal degree with the majority of bricklayers. Lastly, if the injustice and sufferings to which unrepresented classes are liable, be the proper reason for conferring representation on every class, I need only observe that the wrongs and disabilities of all kinds under which my particular class suffers are too notorious to require citation. Perhaps the reader asks, What, then, is this class which is thus excluded from the franchise, while fulfilling all the conditions on which we commonly suppose that privilege rests? Possibly I may be an alien, who has no claim to a voice in English affairs; or a criminal, who has justly forfeited such claim; or, at all events, a member of a class so small and inconsiderable that it has been overlooked by our legislators. None of these hypotheses will apply to the case. My ancestors have owned English lands for many centuries. I have never been accused of any legal offence. Lastly, the class to which I belong is not a very small one. It includes, according to the last census, rather the larger half of the entire nation. Am I very illogical in demanding one of two things, either that my class shall have provision made for its representation in the coming Reform, or that the friends of Reform should cease to distract us with the repetition of arguments at which they themselves shrug their shoulders with contempt for their unpracticalness, whenever they happen to be cited in behalf not of bricklayers, but of women?"

This letter was signed "A Woman," but it contains sufficient internal evidence to show that it was from the pen of one of the most highly-gifted of our countrywomen—alike eminent as an elegant essayist, a courageous traveller, a profound thinker, and an indefatigable and kind-hearted philanthropist—Miss Frances Power Cobbe.

The question of the propriety of conceding the elective franchise to women is now occupying a share of public attention in England, and as I am not aware that it has been discussed by this Society, I purpose drawing attention to it for a short time this evening.

The agitation of this subject was commenced in the United States eighteen years ago; and in the United Kingdom, so far back as 13th

February, 1851, a petition of women, agreed to by a public meeting at Sheffield and claiming the franchise, was presented to the House of Lords by the late Earl of Carlisle; and in July of the same year a most able article appeared in the *Westminster Review* on the subject, from the pen of the late Mrs. John Stuart Mill.

The burthen of proof that women have no such right rests entirely with the opponents of the idea. I do not claim it in cases where, if men, they would not be entitled to it; but I maintain that, step by step, as the franchise is opened to men so it ought to be to women. It appears to me an abstract right, and certainly any one who adopts the following sentiments of the American Declaration of Independence must grant it:—"We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are all endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments were instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

In all legislation hitherto there appears to be wanting a spirit of truth and high morality. The spirit of religion does not pervade it in any way. The legislature of a country should rather lead the way in everything good instead of being dragged as the unwilling companion of progress. May it not be that in the purer morality and quicker intuitions of women, expressed through their representatives in Parliament, we might find what would tend to alter this condition of affairs, when their minds would have been opened by a wider experience of the world, and unfettered by custom, for at present, from their past education, women would be more likely at first to strengthen the anti-progressive tendencies of society. Let us do complete and ample justice to every being, and be content to leave the results to time, content that we have done our part, when we act justly we can do no more, and need never blame ourselves for the consequences of having so acted. It is stated that Plato and Condorcet favoured the equality of women in the state, whilst the younger Pitt used it as an argument against the extension of the franchise to men, that it would be impossible to refuse it to women. Need I refer to history to prove that women have on occasions shown quite as much administrative abilities as men, and more than we could expect when we consider the education they have had.

It is urged that women do not want the franchise. This is true enough of the majority, but a very large body of intelligent women in the United Kingdom and United States do desire it, and are taking considerable trouble to obtain it. We should not refuse equal rights to some because others do not appreciate them. I know there are many intelligent educated men who say they do not want the franchise—all they desire is to be let alone to mind their own affairs. But do you think more of a man who talks thus, and should it make you think more of a woman? It appears to me intense selfishness for men or women to shut their minds to public affairs, and refuse

to take part in them. All obtain the advantages conferred by the state : all are responsible for the evils caused by bad laws or the maladministration of good ones. Public opinion is so warped on the subject that it is actually looked upon as something virtuous rather than disgraceful (which it is) for a man to say, "*I never meddle in politics : I mind my own business.*" At least those who think so on politics or religion have no right to criticise those who do think. The man who says he does not interfere in either will generally be found to be the severest critic on those who do. I do not wish to press too heavily on those who believe that they cannot afford to express opinions of their own ; but surely it ought to be admitted that it is more desirable to be able to do so than otherwise.

It is urged that politics will harden women. How so? They do not harden men. The man who is entirely wrapped up in his own affairs and those of his own family, to the exclusion of matters of wider interest, is generally a more selfish man than he who is also interested in the welfare of his fellow-men.

It is alleged that women will be open to bribery—of course they will, just as men are, but I do not suppose in any larger proportion. It would be quite as good a reason to vote for a man because he is handsome and kisses the babies all round, as because he flatters you and solemnly declares he will take the very first opportunity to serve you : it is quite as creditable to be bribed by a gift of a pair of earrings as by some pots of porter or by a £10 note.

It is asked, have not women power enough already? Do they not sway matters quite as much now as is necessary, by home influence and cajoling men? I ask, would it not be much better to give them direct power, since underhand influence is not considered peculiarly beneficial to any one.

It is objected that women being absorbed in household cares have no time to give to public matters. A very large number of women have no household cares to attend to ; and the number of these is likely to increase as employments open up for women, as their minds become cultivated, and as they have not to look to marriage as their only resource. Besides, there are one million of females who can never be married, in excess of males, in the United Kingdom. But even when quite engaged, the majority of women would have as much time to give to political considerations as the majority of men : for after all, even with the man who takes in politics a most intelligent interest, how little time is it really necessary for him to give up? The sum of it consists in attendance at a public meeting a few times in a year, a glance at his daily newspaper, and half an hour at a polling booth every three or four years. As for the actual business of legislation not one man in a thousand would have time for it, but how unjust would it be to shut out the nine hundred and ninety-nine from the right? Even of those who do undertake to perform their political duties, how few fulfil them in any measure as they ought to do. A dinner or the prospect of partidge-shooting has power to draw away the attention of many Mem-

bers of Parliament from matters of vast national importance, whilst the few who do fulfil their duties are overtaken because the majority are careless of them. The degree in which merchants are absorbed in business is said to have been used as an argument by Cicero against the idea of their having any political rights: would merchants or traders now consent to be deprived of them on a similar plea?

But surely you would not have women endure all the roughness and brutality displayed at a voting booth? Certainly not, any more than I would have men undergo them. A competent government should be able to secure the quiet exercise of the franchise, either by the ballot, by voting papers, or otherwise. But in this as in all other matters, I do not fear that women would do anything contrary to their delicacy or dignity. Give them the right, and let them exercise it or not as they think well.

It is urged that the possession of political power would cause heart-burning and divisions in families. The same objection might be urged against women having opinions on religion or any other subject. If the franchise were conceded to women, female relatives would be most likely to agree with male relatives, and marriages would be more probable between persons of similar political views; but should differences occur after marriage, they should be borne as religious differences are now submitted to. Where there is mutual respect, there is mutual respect for each other's opinions. No two people can think exactly alike on every subject, and it is monstrous to expect that when a woman is married she should see eye to eye with her husband, or that after marriage people are not as free to think and alter their minds as they were before. To be sure, Rousseau argued that women should be brought up without religious ideas, for he says: "As the conduct of a woman is subservient to the public opinion, her faith in matters of religion should for that very reason be subject to authority. Every daughter ought to be of the same religion as her mother, and every wife of the same religion as her husband: for though such religion should be false, that docility which induces the mother and daughter to submit to the order of nature, takes away in the sight of God the criminality of their error. As they are not in a capacity to judge for themselves, they ought to abide by the decision of their fathers and husbands as confidently as by that of the Church." And further: "As authority ought to regulate the religion of the women, it is not so needful to explain to them the reasons for their belief, as to lay down precisely the tenets they are to believe: for the creed which presents only obscure ideas to the mind is the source of fanaticism, and that which presents absurdities leads to infidelity." In our own day we see the facility with which docile princesses change their opinions when they marry royal spouses of a different faith.

Mrs. J. S. Mill remarks, "With respect to the influence personally exercised by women over men, it no doubt renders them less harsh and brutal; in ruder times it was often the only softening influence to which they were accessible. But the assertion that the

wife's influence renders the man less selfish, contains, as things now are, fully as much error as truth. Selfishness towards the wife herself, and towards those in whom she is interested—the children—though favoured by their dependence, the wife's influence no doubt tends to counteract. But the general effect on him of her character, so long as her interests are concentrated in the family, tends but to substitute for individual selfishness a family selfishness, wearing an amiable guise, and putting on the mask of duty. How rarely is the wife's influence on the side of public virtue! how rarely does it do otherwise than discourage any effort of principle, by which the private interests or worldly vanities of the family may be expected to suffer! Public spirit, sense of duty towards the public good, is of all virtues, as women are now educated and situated, the most rarely to be found among them; they have seldom even, what in men is a partial substitute in public spirit, a sense of public honour connected with any public duty. Many a man, whom no money or personal flattery would have bought, has bartered his political opinions against a title or invitations for his wife; and a still greater number are made mere hunters after the puerile vanities of society, because their wives value them." The exclusive life of women generally tends to make them more liable to form caste feelings than men, and to cherish prejudices political, social, or religious, more deeply than men possibly can, who move about, encounter opponents, and find that they who differ from them are not so bad after all.

This subject is now beginning to claim a full share of public attention in the United Kingdom, and is destined, I believe, to hold its place till full rights are conceded. It was brought before the United Parliament by Mr. Mill last May, on a motion to substitute *person* for *man* in the English Reform Bill. His speech was most able, and I consider was in no way answered by his opponents. The result of the division surprised every one, and apparently showed the conviction which his words wrought. In a house of about 214 members, 80 voted for Mr. Mill, including five pairs.

The following petitions were presented in favour of this measure to the last session of the United Parliament.—

On 28th March, a petition signed by 3,559 persons;

On the same day, a petition from Dumfries, signed by 34 persons;

On 5th April, a petition signed by 3,161 persons;

On the same day, a petition signed by 1,605 unmarried women and widows possessing the legal qualifications of an elector;

On 11th April, a petition from Edinburgh, signed by 2,849 persons, including 800 women possessing the property qualification;

On the same day, a petition from Manchester, signed by 246 women fulfilling all the conditions required from parliamentary electors; also a supplementary petition from Manchester, signed by 4,200 persons;

On the same day, a petition from Hastings, signed by 54 persons;

On 25th July, a petition from Colchester, signed by 129 persons. Amongst the names signed to these petitions, appear those of

Dr. Alford, Dean of Canterbury, Mrs. Alford, Viscount Amberley, Jacob Bright, Professor Cairnes, W. B. Carpenter, M.D., F.R.S., Miss Frances Power Cobbe, Rev. J. Llewellyn Davies, Lady Goldsmid, George Grote, Mrs. Grote, G. W. Hastings, Rev. Newman Hall, Mrs. Mary Howitt, Professor Huxley, Rev. Charles Kingsley, Mrs. Isa Craig Knox, George McDonald, Rev. James Martineau, Miss Harriet Martineau, Professor Masson, Professor Newman, E. H. Sieveking, M.D., Goldwin Smith, Mrs. Somerville, Miss Emily Taylor, Rev. John James Tayler, J. Todhunter, Cambridge, John Westlake, Rev. J. Wolstenholme, F.C.C., Cambridge, &c. &c. As for the petition from Dublin it was so poorly signed that I am ashamed to mention the number of signatures. May I hope that the next which emanates from this city will be more to our credit.

Of course the general public can scarcely conceal its mirth at the idea of conceding the franchise to women; it is thought so ridiculous they cannot give it a moment's serious attention, and many of the leading papers try to sneer it down. When will people learn that the sneers or censure of a leading newspaper is often very high praise? What new idea or great truth has not been thought absurd at first hearing? We should doubt that there is anything infallible in the judgment of current public opinion, when we consider how often it has been tested and found to be utterly mistaken. Many instances of past mistakes are now condemned; so, in like manner, may the coming ages condemn the public opinion of the present day, which refuses the franchise to women.

I do not desire woman to be less sweet or noble than she is. She is physically weaker than man, and it is of the utmost consequence to her that every avenue by which she can compete with him intellectually should be left open to her. Nor do I wish to dogmatise as to what she can do or what she cannot, what station in life she can fill or what she cannot. As yet we do not absolutely know the limits of her capacity, and we cannot know until every legal restriction is removed.

I will conclude with some fine lines by Ben Jonson which were quoted on another occasion by that gifted and high-minded woman, Margaret Fuller Ossoli:—

I meant the day star should not brighter ride,  
 Nor lend like influence from its lucent seat;  
 I meant she should be courteous, facile, sweet,  
 Free from that solemn vice of greatness, pride,  
 I meant each softest virtue there should meet,  
 Fit in that softer bosom to abide,  
 Only a learnéd and a manly soul  
 I purposed her, that should with even powers  
 The rock, the spindle, and the shears control  
 Of destiny, and spin her own free hours.

---