11

Politics, Community and Protest

Introduction

During the second half of the nineteenth century new opportunities emerged for female involvement in public and political affairs. In addition to the evolving philanthropic tradition, women gained access to local government office and direct involvement in party politics. The women's rights movement also burgeoned, bringing with it the growth of a feminist sensibility which embraced not just women's rights, but such issues as temperance, social morality and peace. In all these areas, women's confidence to engage with the 'public sphere' drew upon a complex mix of cultural influences. Evangelical, feminist, political, imperial and national discourses proliferated and diverged to produce enormous diversity in both women's activities and their ideological motivations. Meanwhile, the consolidation of a female consciousness encouraged many female activists to seek cross-class collaboration – ambitions which frequently foundered upon the particularity of their own political visions.

Philanthropy

Philanthropy continued to be a major occupation of middle- and upper-class women (see also Chapter 10). For many women this was an added burden in an already demanding life, but for countless others – particularly single women – philanthropy remained an important source of fulfilment. Most landed women continued to take some responsibility for the well-being of their tenants.¹ Such activities were part of the cultural fabric of rural life, underlining community ties of
authority and deference. Lady Suffield and her daughter visited their local tenants in Norfolk in 1877 to persuade the women that they ‘ought not to allow their husbands to strike’. Nevertheless, this tradition was beginning to falter: public debate over ‘dependant paupers’, combined with aristocratic parsimony during the agricultural depression, encouraged a shift from personal to organised philanthropy. Many charitable societies had mixed-sex committees and by the end of the century it was assumed that those catering for women and children should be entrusted to the management of female volunteers.

At the local level, landed women were active in setting up branches of the Mothers’ Union, the Brabazon Society (for workhouse reform), Girls’ Friendly Societies, and also in encouraging district nursing services in their locality. Meanwhile, wider horizons for philanthropic work were emerging in the British empire, particularly in the field of education. Annette Ackroyd Beveridge, who opened her own girls’ school in India, is one example of the articulation of a ‘maternal imperialism’, in which Indian women were constructed as ‘helpless, voiceless, hopeless’. Less typical were the Irish educationist, Margaret Noble, and the feminist theosophist, Annie Besant, whose work in India eventually led them to support Indian nationalism.

The philanthropic tradition was also evolving in other directions. A number of women were now seeking to assist working-class women by promoting trade unionism. The Women’s Protective and Provident League (WPPL), established in 1874 by Emma Paterson, aimed to safeguard the industrial interests of working-class women and to encourage working women to mobilise themselves. Similar motives inspired the Glasgow Council for Women’s Trades and the Women’s Industrial Council (WIC, 1894) which also campaigned for improved educational provision. The feminist-inspired, middle-class organisers hoped that their actions would herald a new era of cross-class sisterhood. In practice, the philanthropic relationship failed to provide insights into the real needs of working women. Middle-class organisations were mostly opposed to protective legislation, seeing it as an unwarranted restriction upon women’s right to work. They struggled to appreciate that most working-class women perceived such measures as a positive contribution to their employment welfare, often bringing a welcome reduction in hours. It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that some middle-class campaigners, in particular those influenced by socialism, such as Clementina Black, encouraged the WPPL (now renamed the Women’s Trade Union League and led by Lady