5

Women in a Changing Society: Conclusion

When discussing the fiction I have been exploring in the previous chapters, it has seemed reasonable to suppose that many of these works reflect current ideas and trends within the writers’ own society, and that their novels often act as mouthpieces for their contemporary female readership, both analysing and questioning issues within their own culture, and expressing this questioning eloquently and entertainingly. But is there supporting evidence for these suppositions? To show that there is, I am going to examine three nonfictional, feminist publications of the four decades I have been exploring, which will serve to confirm that the ways in which the novelists writing between 1928 and 1968 respond to their world do indeed reflect attitudes and expectations of that society, while at the same time the ways in which the vast majority of women were treated by their society (and in consequence were rated by themselves) were often less progressive than the suffragettes could have wished. These three middle-class assessments of women’s position in society show how changing conditions affect the view of their priorities, their roles and their potential.

In 1929, in response to the granting of universal suffrage, the Hon. Mrs Dighton Pollock’s *The Women of Today* was published. While the author acknowledges the limitations of her findings (interestingly, limitations she acknowledges in terms of race rather than class), she charts a clear way forward for newly emancipated women, urging that ‘the ultimate use of freedom is to exercise the power of choice’.¹ Among other things, she discusses the way in which ‘public opinion’ has moved from the old morality of Puritan self-denial to a new outlook, based on the ideas of Freud and Jung, ‘as to the dangers of repression’ (p. 11); and she goes on to consider the pros and cons of monogamy – on the whole she favours it, but supports divorce rather than the continuation of a
bad relationship. She lists various areas in which women still need to fight for improvement, ranging from greater efficiency in the running of the home to the right of women to continue in employment when they marry. She urges women to be seen to take their jobs seriously, and not to accept inferior status passively, and she also urges the profitable use of leisure, while not falling into the trap of merging this with the ‘enforced idleness of unemployment’ (p. 44). She urges the use of the newly gained vote, arguing against the familiar complaint made against political parties, that ‘They’re all alike, promise everything and do nothing’ (p. 57), and listing areas that should be addressed, such as the cause of peace and the need for improvements in education. Finally she urges the young (for whom, she notes, the suffragettes are already history) to vote; frivolity, she says, is not enough. In sum, the tone of Mrs Pollock’s book is positive; she sees that there is much to be done, both in society at large and with regard to issues specifically affecting women, but she sets out a programme which anticipates progress and greater involvement for women in the improvement of social and political conditions. And she is not alone. The Duchess of Atholl, for example, is equally positive in her book Women and Politics (1931), addressed to new women voters, although her tone is much less egalitarian; rather than concentrating on the tasks confronting women who want to improve their own opportunities and to exercise choice within their society, she sets out to instruct the woman voter on the duties of domesticity, the (conservative) politics of the day and the responsibilities of empire. Yet, whatever their differences, both authors see universal franchise as the dawn of a new era for women, and, while obstacles are still acknowledged, this sense of the possibility of a positive role for women is, by and large, reflected in the women’s fiction of the early thirties, although the growing fascist threat of a backlash against women’s emancipation soon clouds this optimism as the thirties progress.

When we turn to the conclusions issuing from the Conference on the Feminine Point of View, which took place from 1947 to 1951, the impact of the War and its horrors is immediately obvious. The report on this conference sets out its motivation in dramatic terms: ‘The discussion here summarized originated less in dissatisfaction with the position of women than in dissatisfaction verging on despair with the present state and future prospects of human society’; and it quotes the Director General of UNESCO as saying that ‘mankind needs urgently the active intervention of women. If it is to survive, humanity must make use of all its inheritance’ (p. 14). As a result, the report states that the conference abandoned the earlier priority of those ‘dissatisfied