

## Anne G. Reid: Women Workers in the Liberal Cause

Anne G. Reid, *Women Workers in the Liberal Cause* (London, T. Fisher Unwin, [1887]). British Library: 8139.aa.35.(4.).

Anne Gilzean Reid was married to Sir Hugh Gilzean Reid (1836–1911) and was a founder member and president of the Women’s Liberal Association. She died in 1895.<sup>1</sup> Her essay appeared in the pages of the *Westminster Review* (1824–1914) and as a pamphlet during the Liberal Party’s push to build its own organisation for women. The Women’s Liberal Federation (WLF) later became a forum for women to lobby the Liberal party on issues such as votes, but was initially set up to tackle the growing Conservative agenda represented by the Primrose League, founded in homage to Lord Beaconsfield. Its structure was elitist, based as it was on the medieval orders of knights and dames, and Reid soundly ridiculed its *modus operandi*.

The initial aims of the WLF were to mobilise new membership initiatives and co-ordinate the local Liberal movements that were springing up in parts of the country. Though William Gladstone was earlier unwilling to endorse a national federation, his movement on this issue indicates the extent to which women were being acknowledged as integral to the mediation of the philosophy and ideas of both Tories and Liberals. Though their president Mrs Catherine Gladstone was not entirely sympathetic to women’s rights, the women of the WLF began in earnest to recruit the volunteer activists required to compete with the Tories, simultaneously encouraging the female scions within Liberal families to engage with suffragist ideas. The purpose and direction of the WLF was never firmly settled, with some women seeking to moderate what they saw as the potentially damaging political strategies of the more radical members, while the more ambitious suffragists attempted to use it as a vehicle to link female suffrage with the Liberal Party itself. The movement would later become more strident in embracing feminist social reforms, but certainly when Reid’s essay was published the WLF was not committed to women’s suffrage. Her text, however, is worded to suggest its inevitability in the future.<sup>2</sup>

1 ODNB.

2 Martin Pugh, *The March of the Women: A Revisionist Analysis of the Campaign for Women’s Suffrage, 1866–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 132–6; Constance Rover, *Women’s Suffrage and Party Politics in Britain*,

Reid's pamphlet envisages women's work in a different way from other texts in this volume. For Reid, the status that 'work' could afford women was not necessarily based on income generation or attaining professional status. Instead she placed value on women being able to make best use of their faculties free of all unjust impediments while maintaining their natural 'sincerity and self-sacrificing devotion' (p. 259): a position that focused less specifically on the home and more on women's duties within the public realm. Her representation of 'work' as, for all intents and purposes, political agitation also had the effect of limiting the numbers and class of women who could be involved, because such activity required time and resources. Certainly a Gladstonian paternalism where the privileged classes spoke for and on behalf of working-class women is evident in *Woman Workers in the Liberal Cause*.

Reid's grounds for asserting the place of women in the political arena still associated femininity with the natural, thus collapsing the new social and political roles Reid represented into the realm of the biological. The idea of femininity as natural was a key difference upon which women argued for political recognition on the basis that traditional forms of political representation could not account for women's social contribution. Reid extended the metaphor of the domestic to encompass the idea of the nation as a 'wider home', rather than the home itself. This facilitated the transformation of the woman from household organiser to political agitator through domestic ideology. The extent of a woman's moral and political influence was both the driving force and the objective of the liberal ideology Reid espoused. The representation of the nation as 'home' for example replaced the former political spaces of female influence such as the 'stately dinners' of the social calendar, thus widening the sphere of women's political influence. This strategy of women emphasising new applications for their talents, while highlighting the qualities for which they have traditionally been esteemed might seem self-defeating. Yet such an emphasis demonstrated how differently women were represented from men, emphasising the importance of women speaking for women.

WOMEN WORKERS  
IN THE  
LIBERAL CAUSE

BY  
MRS. H. G. REID

WITH PREFATORY NOTE BY  
MRS. GLADSTONE

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PREFATORY NOTE.



*I have been so much struck by this Paper that I am anxious it should not go forth to the world without a few words from me of strong commendation.*

*These I venture to give it as President of the Women's Liberal Federation.*

*We cannot recognize too clearly the crying need of education and combined effort amongst women. A great cause, such as that which now lies nearest to our hearts, the cause of Ireland, should arouse in us a passionate desire for thorough and accurate knowledge of its history. Strange that this should have been so much overlooked!*

*In this Pamphlet, we learn the methods of acquiring and imparting knowledge, and the use we may be in helping to guide, purify, and stimulate great political movements:*

CATHERINE GLADSTONE.

## WOMEN WORKERS IN THE LIBERAL CAUSE.

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ONE element has hitherto been inadequately represented in Liberal organization and activities. Women have failed to exercise their rightful influence, and to fill a place for which they are conspicuously fitted. And it must be said that Liberal Associations have not always sought to enlist women helpers, or even appreciated their co-operation. Of late some of the leaders have perceived that a new political power is arising, the existence of which has to be acknowledged and welcomed as a factor in future movements. Within a recent and brief period, Women's Liberal Associations have been originated, with an aggregate membership of over ten thousand; whilst in some districts "mixed" societies exist, as in Brixton, where the Liberal Alliance, with its code of rules and its declaration of the "political equality of men and women," is doing admirable work. A Liberal League has been formed; and in the Darwen Division of Lancashire a Union, with over 4000 members, consisting, for the most part, though not exclusively, of women, is bringing a new and invigorating element into political life. The earliest association was established in York; and in Bristol, Darlington, Kensington, Islington, Aston Manor (Birmingham), in Cambridge, Crewe, Kidderminster, Wolverhampton, Newcastle-on-Tyne, Derbyshire (Ilkeston), Redruth,

## ( 4 )

Scarboro', Essex (Kelvedon), Yorkshire, Nottingham, Sheffield, Bradford, and other great centres of population, women are energetically organizing themselves and preparing to take part in diffusing political knowledge and in securing the triumph of Liberal principles.

This is not all, or perhaps the most remarkable indication of the new spirit which is appearing. In almost every part of the country small groups of women are conferring and inquiring how best to achieve the objects they have in view: it would be no exaggeration to say that from 45,000 to 50,000 women are united for political purposes, or are actively making the necessary preparations, and that they only need counsel and help and time to become integral parts of a generally diffused and thoroughly organized system. The ordinary course is for a few of the most earnest and thoughtful women in a town or district to meet, and, finding a general agreement, to address a circular to friends and neighbours setting forth—

(1) That the central principle of Liberalism is to remove all artificial and unjust impediments to political progress, and, thus, to give to all the chance of making the best of their faculties, so that, while helping in the Liberal cause, women may elevate and brighten their own lives; (2) that, as women exercise a great influence in their homes and in every department of life, a combined and earnest effort is called for to extend the knowledge of Liberal principles, to enable women of all classes to form sound opinions, and to become intelligent helpers in the common cause; (3) that these objects can be most effectually carried out by the creation and distribution of a special literature, the reading of papers, social reunions, mutual interchange of views, and above all by

( 5 )

enlisting the sympathy and securing the adhesion of the young; and (4) by cordially inviting all to meet and become members of the Women's Liberal Association.

After this manner the new movement is being, or will, it is believed, be carried forward in every Parliamentary division, with an enthusiasm and results which will inspire confidence even amongst those who have stood aloof in doubt or indifference. It may be safely asserted that this movement is in no respect the product of a temporary enthusiasm: when women do take the trouble to reach just conclusions they hold to them with sincerity and with self-sacrificing devotion.

The existence of the Primrose League cannot be overlooked, nor can its subtle proselytism be set aside by a sneer. We may despise or condemn its ridiculous paraphernalia, its appeals to the ignorance and frivolous vanities of women, its prostitution of the sacred name of Charity, and its persistent perversion of political principle and the facts of history. We may proclaim that, instead of seeking to redress the wrongs and secure the individual rights of women, it indulges in vague and delusive cries of "The Church," or "The Empire," or some other imaginary "interest" being in danger, knowing well that this is only throwing dust in the eyes of the unthinking, or trying to divert attention from the real reforms which are needed. The League exists, with a widespread membership and ceaseless activity. It possesses a large revenue; it commands the patronage and support of men and women of high position and vast influence; it is resolute, spectacular, defiant, and must be met and counteracted by the combined action of Liberal women, systematically promoting political education; and exercising, by independent and self-respecting

## ( 6 )

intercourse, an enlightened and elevating influence. This counteractive agency may only be a secondary consideration in the new campaign, but it is none the less imperative that the Primrose League should be met by solid argument, sound information, and by earnest and conspicuously honest effort to remove the inequalities, redress the grievances, and elevate the position of the wives and daughters of the people.

If this movement is to be largely successful—if it is to be permanent as well as spontaneous, it must in every sense owe its inception to, and rely in its working mainly on, women themselves. At the same time there ought to be a frank recognition of all existing and well-tried Liberal agencies, and a free inter-communication with them, which will lead to uniformity of effort and concentrated action. However distinctive and separate in its constitution the Women's Association may be, it is essential that there should exist a well-defined *esprit de corps*—a mutual understanding and readiness to co-operate, so that in the domain of politics, as in social and domestic life, the one organization may be the complement of the other, working out common and beneficent ends.

There is an example at hand. The National Liberal Federation, with its head-quarters in London and its numerous branches throughout the country, is an ideal worthy of emulation and imitation. At a great and representative Conference at Leeds, the President of the Federation gave a prompt and unreserved recognition of the work in which women are now fairly engaged. "There were," said Sir James Kitson, "other signs of encouragement which he might mention. One was the activity of many ladies. Women's Liberal Associations were being actively founded; and,

( 7 )

in view of the decorated orders of ladies established by the other side, he thought it was their duty as Liberals to encourage the formation of Women's Liberal Associations." To be strong and mutually helpful, women must be federated, and steps in this direction have been taken. At a Conference held in London, May 1886, and attended by numerous delegates, a Central Union was formed, with Mrs. Theodore Fry—who continues to hold the responsible position—as Honorary Secretary, thus creating the germ of a scheme which has only to be developed to become a thoroughly representative and powerful political agency.

One outcome of this initiatory effort is a significant indication of what has been and can be done. In February 1887, another like gathering was held in London, which in numbers and importance far exceeded the most ardent dream of the promoters. Mrs. Gladstone presided over an assembly including representatives from all parts of London and nearly every provincial centre. The Union was merged in a Women's Liberal Federation—the object being “to bring into union all Liberal Associations of which women are members, and to encourage their co-operation in the promotion of Reform.” A definite programme and code of rules were adopted, committees were chosen, and all the machinery for carrying on a widespread and energetic propaganda was set in motion. Through associations and individual members, the leaders will be brought into touch with every constituency, initiating and inspiring Liberal work and workers. In graceful and homely words, Mrs. Gladstone, the first President of the new Federation, spoke of her old-fashioned views as to the part

which women should take in the work of the world. She held that the efforts of women, as of men, should be open and clear, avoiding the methods and manners of Primrose Dames; and, whilst expressing a deep conviction that many women are ready and can with advantage lend powerful help, she added—"The situation is full of hope; we welcome you to take part in a winning cause."

The desire of thoughtful women to take part in political movements is neither new nor strange. In Municipal, School Board, and Parochial work, they have often, as voters or helpers, rendered invaluable service, and it has not been suggested that the privileges slowly won by them have been abused, or that they ought to be curtailed. The place and claims of women have been frankly acknowledged even by leaders who have entertained doubts as to the ultimate effects of the new departure. In the national struggle of 1880, Mr. Gladstone spoke approvingly of the ways in which "women may best fulfil their duty in the present crisis;" and, replying recently to a women's memorial supporting his Irish policy, and sympathizing with the women of Ireland, he said: "While I regret that you should be called upon to take a part in the rude and contentious labours with which I have so long had to do, I am much gratified with this declaration of opinion."

Every great cause is advanced in at least two ways: by personal ministry and by association. There is an intellectual, a sympathetic and subtle individual service; in community of interest and combined effort are strength and liberalizing force. Women of the Liberal party have not always perceived how much they are needed, how readily they are welcomed, or how much

( 9 )

they can accomplish in all that pertains to the special welfare of their sex and the general advancement of the nation. There are notable exceptions in the records of Liberal policy and achievements. The historic "Houses" in which trained statesmen and youthful aspirants met, under the inspiring reign of noble dames, have played a brilliant part. At stately dinners and receptions distinguished personages met, party machinery was ingeniously manipulated, schemes of reform and new policies were propounded, corners rounded by fair tacticians, and beauty and intellect worked hand in hand. All this is gone for ever. Under an extended franchise and entirely altered conditions, no recourse to such allurements and exclusive manipulation is either possible or desirable. There still remains, however, a legitimate place for social intercourse, and for the free and friendly intermingling of widely different classes, and the interchange of opinion which tends to promote unanimity and to obliterate class distinctions. The old Continental Salon, at once piquant and fascinating, a real power in politics, was not composed merely of party leaders, of colleagues and peers; there was a skilful blending of many elements and of varied interests, softening asperities and producing a strong national sentiment. Reading the *Memoirs of Madame de Staël*, in early girlhood and after-years, has done much to mould the character and kindle the aspirations of many women. She, one of the noblest women of her time, the wittiest talker, the keenest politician—whether in exile, or the star in the most distinguished salon of Europe—was the same true woman, always influencing beneficently those in immediate contact with her. The partisan club has largely superseded as a political centre the

( 10 )

home circle, where great questions were often discussed ; and it is to be feared that the modern club, from which women are for the most part excluded, is not always an adequate substitute.

Perhaps there is nowhere wider scope or more urgent calls for help than in this sphere of political activity. True Liberalism is the embodiment of the imperishable principle, "Do to others as ye would that others should do to you." Through all the jangle and noise of party strife, through much stumbling and many mistakes, true Liberalism is the message of love and justice to the human race. What has it given us? Let the gradual amelioration of the race testify. Religious liberty ; opening the ancient Universities to every capable student ; popular education ; an untaxed loaf ; a widely extended franchise ; such rights as women possess over their own property—these and other like reforms we owe largely to Liberalism. What has it still to do? Much and in many ways, and especially in the direction of improving the position of woman. By the law of England a wife and mother has no sustained right or title to her own children, nor has she a legally defined position in her own family and home : she may be deprived by her husband of the fruits of her life-long industry ; she may be wronged with impunity ; but the time is at hand when inequitable laws will be replaced by laws securing to each man and woman that amount of independence and protection which is consistent with the enjoyment of a like amount by all. We are strenuously opposed to what is called "paternal government," and the unnecessary limitation of any sphere of operation ; but, on the other hand, we earnestly hope that the powerful influence of enlightened public opinion,

( 11 )

emphatically expressed, especially by women, will rapidly ameliorate the deplorable condition of those of their sex who now toil in miserable hovels at nail-making, chain-making, and other exhaustive industries twelve or fifteen hours per day, earning a bare pittance—the helpless victims of grasping middlemen and a grinding competition which they have no power to control. At coal-pits, in some workshops of Lancashire, in Staffordshire and East Worcestershire, multitudes of women are doomed, without help or hope, to pursue their daily rounds of galling drudgery, under conditions which are alike inimical to physical health and moral purity, as well as material improvement, and a disgrace to our so-called civilization.

The objects to which women can with advantage direct their attention are at once varied and urgent. It has to be made absolutely assured that poverty shall be no bar to the education of our children, and that provision is made for safeguarding our daughters in every path of life. Much has to be done to create suitable dwellings for the toilers in towns and rural districts, where social brightness and wholesome sanitary arrangements are attainable, and to equalize taxation so as to lighten the burdens of the poor. There is a special call to mitigate the abounding temptations to vice and intemperance; and to promote measures which aim at restoring the land to the labourer, so as to make the soil more productive and reduce the competition in the overstocked labour markets. The range of woman's interests need not be restrained. To regulate the conditions under which emigration is conducted; to foster friendly intercourse with all parts of the Empire and the world by establishing cheap and frequent postal facilities, thus

welding widespread kinship and strengthening bonds of brotherhood; to discourage war and all that leads up to it, with its waste of human life and squandering of national resources;—these and like far-reaching objects are surely within the province of woman, and their attainment should enlist her zealous co-operation.

If these aspirations are to be fully realized, women must be placed in a position to give them practical effect. The right to vote has been virtually given to every sane male, and, however strongly some may dread or resent the change, a like privilege will certainly be conceded to women. The suffrage movement is aggressive and is rapidly gathering force; the cry of unfitness and indelicacy has well-nigh died away; nearly half the members of the late House of Commons and Liberal Government were pledged to support the measure introduced by Mr. Woodall; and politicians of all shades would do well to prepare for the extended suffrage, which will bring with it at once a refining influence and a readier and more generous consideration of woman's long-neglected claims.

In this light, it is instructive to note the attitude taken by enlightened women in respect to the demand of Ireland for self-government, and the comprehensive scheme submitted to Parliament and the country by the Liberal Leader. With promptitude and zeal, many of them who had not previously taken part in politics threw themselves into the discussion of this question; and, whilst giving full play to their instinct of pity, conclusively vindicated their sense of justice and their aptitude in forming a sound and decisive judgment. They felt that the representatives of Home Rule, Lord and Lady Aberdeen, had taken to Ireland a message of peace, that they had penetrated the national senti-

( 13 )

ment and touched the heart of the Irish peasantry, and there had been thus given a foretaste of the fuller life to be realized under the trustful and safeguarded measure by which Mr. Gladstone sought to grant the Irish absolute control over their domestic affairs, and seeks to establish a true and lasting union. Arguing from their own experience of home and life, these women asked: What is Union? Is it the narrow gold band worn since the wedding day? Is it the legal rite which pronounced "husband and wife"? Is it not rather the linking of sympathies and aims, the independent yet co-related rule in each department of life and the full recognition of individual rights and common interests? This was the spontaneous response of the majority of liberal-minded women, who saw in Mr. Gladstone's proposals a determination, not to mar but to perfect the Union, and to stimulate into wholesome growth the restrained, hopeful, impetuous spirit of the Irish people. Now, at length awakened by this demand for sympathy and help, women are rapidly opening their eyes to survey the whole field of politics.

The question arises; How can this all-important work of women in the Liberal cause be accomplished with the least friction or disturbance of domestic arrangements? It has been finely said—"We know how the government of a home suffers where the touch of a woman's hand and the electric force of a woman's heart are wanting, and we believe that the same sympathy, refinement, and emotional insight are needed to purify and ennoble the government of the larger home—our country." Many still contemplate with doubt the new order of things, and feel that "there's somewhat flows to us in life, but more is

( 14 )

taken quite away," and sigh for the old days when home was the one realm a woman knew, domestic arts and pursuits her first if not exclusive ambition, when men surrounded their women-folk with a strong mute tenderness, a curious commingling of chivalrous protection and half-contemptuous pity for their weakness. To this regretful sigh is added a not unnatural dislike to the sanctity of woman's sphere being rudely broken in upon by every would-be reformer asking: What shall we do with our women? How shall they be educated? Where shall we find outlets for their labour? The answer is at hand: Women have taken up the problem, and they themselves will find the solution. With a feeling of sadness or with awakened hopefulness, their own intuitions have foreseen the change, and, while others have been talking loudly and writing vaguely, they have been quietly falling into line for work. The process has been gradual, often silent, but it is genuine and progressive. Those who object to women entering on this wider mission have as yet no conception of what women feel themselves capable of achieving, and forget that the busiest life can hold the most, that in variety of interest and occupation lie increased strength and usefulness.

The work is essentially women's work. Let there be no misunderstanding on this point. To the vast majority there is no need to go outside home, in which the larger political necessities and the desire to instruct and benefit should ever find appreciation and readiest outlet. Who is there linked with husband or brother or friend that cannot in some way guide, as well as be guided—it may be to transform unworthy indifference into quickened zeal, or to stimulate honest endeavour to mitigate or redress admitted wrongs?

( 15 )

This new interest may bring a fresh and a brighter spirit to the world-weary toiler of the household, or give a healthy aim to the mere pleasure-lover and the purposeless dreamer. There is much to be done in attracting and instructing the young, in storing their minds with the facts of history and experience, and placing before them the nobler possibilities of life. On the other hand, men feel increasingly the strain of life; they are conscious of the solace of a faithful and instructed ally, and there is an imperious call that the influence of woman should permeate every movement. The advancement of science and the introduction of mechanical appliances have oiled the household wheels, lightened labour, reduced house-keeping to something like an art, and thus the widened sympathy and practical co-operation may be freely accorded without encroaching on the sacred province which woman has made all her own.

This new departure is a direct outcome of the higher education, and to be really useful and enduring the work must be educational. Agencies are needed for instruction upon political, social, and moral questions; popular literature adapted to the lowliest has to be created and widely distributed, so that at all times, and particularly in any serious national crisis, there may exist a well-defined standard of right and wrong and duty, in accordance with which a sound opinion may be formed and a wise and vigorous policy be adopted. As the one aim is to give adhesion only to just and necessary measures of reform, all should be prepared to deliberate intelligently and avoid being led away by ignorance and prejudice; and when help in any specific movement is called for—when, for example, an election takes place or some definite

issue is submitted for popular arbitrament—the woman worker will be found duly equipped for the conflict.

The methods of acquiring knowledge and imparting instruction are various and many-sided. By reading and observation; by means of libraries and lectures; by trying to master each subject as it comes up for discussion, turning upon it rays of light from many minds in friendly debate; by public meetings; by house-to-house visits, and by the elevating influence of social and intellectual intercourse, this new mission of women is to be successfully carried forward. We have our religious and moral agencies, our University Extension Schemes, our Schools of Art and Needlework; and why should we not have political training classes, ladies' reading clubs, and systematic courses of study for all, but especially for the young? There is here a field rich in promise, attractive to the organizing mind, and proffering ample employment to all willing helpers. Women have now fairly entered upon this field, and they will persevere till the work is done. The result will speedily become apparent in greater breadth of view, a higher culture, and a truer appreciation of the relationships between men and women. By bringing women face to face with the difficulties which delay the accomplishment of urgently needed reforms, there will be a toning down of passionate beliefs, of hasty judgments, and of the intolerance due to the limitations of a contracted life. From this elementary stage woman's work will gradually attain its full fruition, and out of diversity of thought and effort there will come harmony and strength, along with the advancement of Liberal principles and the promotion of the well-being of the race.