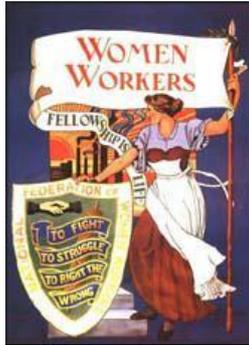


Women and Labour Movement: The Early Years



Introduction

The onset of class-based societies 10,000 to 8,000 years ago led to the general subjugation of women that has been reinforced socially, culturally and legally down the ages. The occasional exceptions to this rule occur only at the highest realms of class society, where ruling class women, such as Cleopatra, Boadicea and Elizabeth I might assume leadership at certain times. Apart from these few examples the role of women throughout history has either been downplayed or airbrushed out. Working women have been subject to a double oppression under capitalism, first as women as lacking rights and second as part of a working class that is exploited economically and in other ways. Whilst in the modern era many gains have been made for women there remain significant deficits and these will remain as long as we have capitalism.

Although the focus of these essays is upon women and their role in the political realm this should not be seen as an endorsement of identity politics, which as Laura Pidcock has pointed out, has been a far-reaching liberal concept in the labour movement, with serious implications for unity and understanding. An approach that eschews identity politics does not mean, as she pointed out, that as socialists we do not energetically act to support oppressed and discriminated groups in society. Rather it is to seek always to unify and integrate all those suffering in our capitalist society to overthrow that system and thus root out the fundamental causes of oppression and skewed power arrangements that such a system fosters.

My recent pieces on the history of the British labour movement failed to give sufficient coverage of the role of women. This was largely due to the scarcity of information in the various sources I was using. Where there was information I tried to give appropriate coverage. But it remained a weakness. Then, I came across Nan Sloane's useful book, *The Women in the Room* (2018). This then prompted further research on the Internet.

Background

At the beginning of the 19th century women had few rights. They could not vote and were often denied an education. Upon marriage their separate legal existence was ended, their money passed to their husband. To all intents and purposes they became the property of their husbands. They could be legally beaten. Women who did not marry and had no inherited wealth often lived a precarious existence. Those with some education usually became governesses or teachers and in the later period nurses.

During the second half of the 19th century women were still denied the vote, still did not enjoy full and equal rights in law and, then as now, worked for less pay than men. Although there was a strong view among men that the woman's place was in the home many working class women and many single middle class women worked for a living. Married working women were also expected to undertake the main role in domestic work, such as childcare, washing, cleaning and cooking. The larger families of the second half of the 19th century meant that domestic work was became an even greater burden on women's time and energy. Unless childcare was available from relatives or friends many working class women could not undertake paid work and this is reflected in the declining proportion of working class women who worked during the latter part of the

19th and early part of the 20th centuries. Middle class women might have wider options if they were either single or had an enlightened family or husband.

The restrictions noted above also applied to political activity. Women's engagement in trade unions and political parties tended to be limited by all the factors considered. Nevertheless women did get involved and played important and, often, unsung roles supporting husbands and families when strikes were called, becoming active trade unionists themselves where opportunities presented and engaging in political parties as and when able. Recent studies have revealed that women played a much more significant role in political and trade union activities than hitherto thought. Local studies have also shed light on the way women helped to build and sustain local trade union and socialist activities, sometimes taking a leading role. This essay will seek to highlight some of these achievements and try to create a more balanced view of the role of women in the early labour movement.

Despite the difficulties women faced in undertaking political action it is a fact that they have been politically active throughout the ages in various ways. Women were active members of the radical group, the Levellers, marching and taking petitions to Parliament in the 1640s. The American Revolution (1776) and the French Revolution (1789) impacted significantly on thought in Britain and led to the creation of a number of Republican clubs. This in turn led to the creation of **Female Reform Societies**, which held meetings and published addresses. Several cartoonists lampooned these ventures, including Cruikshank.



The new radicalism, inspired by the American and French Revolutions, also produced important female thinkers such as **Mary Wollstonecraft**, who wrote the *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). She was viciously attacked but the ideas in her book now entered the radical underworld and political discourse.

The radical activist and publisher, Richard Carlile, who published Tom Paine's books and many other radical tracts and pamphlets was consistently imprisoned for seditious libel. His wife, **Jane Carlile** and his sister, **Mary Anne Carlile** carried on

the publishing business and were both also imprisoned as a result. **Susannah Wright** responded to the call for volunteers to continue publishing at the same works. She too was charged with seditious libel and in a celebrated court case argued her own defence in the most defiant terms. She was supported by significant number of radical female supporters. Nevertheless she too was imprisoned.

Luddism was an organised workers movement, which wrecked new machinery that was replacing so many jobs in various textile industries in Nottingham, Yorkshire and Lancashire in the early part of the 19th century. Whilst women did not generally play a role in the attacks on mills, they did play supportive roles as well as a prominent role in the food riots, such as the one in Manchester in the spring of 1812. Many women were present at the Peterloo gathering and subsequent massacre in 1819 and many were among the dead and injured.

In this early period women participants in the struggle for working class rights and improvements were still focused on supporting their husbands and brothers, and they did not generally demand political and social rights for themselves. By long standing tradition women did not speak at political meetings, which were often held outdoors or in rowdy public houses. Indeed it was seen as a radical departure when at a meeting at Lydgate, Saddleworth one of the speakers, Samuel Bamford, successfully moved that women be allowed to vote on the resolutions.

Women's role in the early Socialist and Chartist movements

The Owenite Movement

Much of the following on the Owenite movement is based upon a short article by Michael Herbert and found on Manchester's Radical History webpages.

The members of the radical Co-operative Movement of the 1830s, inspired by the ideas and writings of Robert Owen, wanted to create a world based on mutual co-operation and not capitalist competition. They challenged not just the social and economic structure of society but also the conventional morality of the age on issues such as marriage and relationships between men and women. For the first time women not only discussed ideas of social change but also appeared as speakers and proselytisers for a new society.

Many of the Owenites called themselves Socialists, using the word for the first time. The women lecturers of the movement included **Anna Wheeler, Emma Martin, Eliza Macauley, Margaret Chappelsmith and Frances Morrison**. Images have survived of at least three of these pioneering women.



Emma Martin



Eliza Macauley



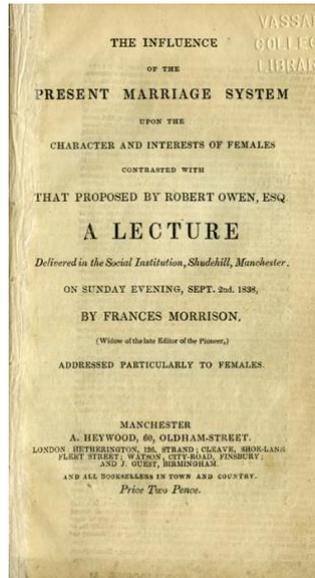
Frances Morrison

By taking the example of Frances Morrison it is possible to gain an insight into the role of women in the Owenite movement.

Frances was born in Surrey, the illegitimate daughter of a farm labourer and was brought up by her grandmother. Aged just 16 she ran off with James Morrison, a house-painter who was tramping the country looking for work. They lived together until she became pregnant, whereupon they got married. They had many children and lived in Birmingham where Frances ran a newspaper shop and began reading Robert Owen's work. She later wrote to him "*Long 'ere I began to think, my reason warred with the absurd forms of society, but from an ill-cultivated and wrong direction given to my mind, I could never get a solid idea until the perusal of your Essays*". In 1833 James, who was an active reformer and trade unionist, became editor of ***The Pioneer***. France wrote for the paper under the pseudonym "A Bondswoman", addressing issues such as equal pay and the marriage system.

After her husband's death in 1835 Frances became a paid Owenite lecturer, speaking across the north. She moved to Salford in the late 1830s where there was a vigorous Owenite movement, based at the Salford Institute, and later the Hall of Science. In July 1839 she spoke at a meeting in New George Street, Shudehill and the following report appeared in the ***New Moral World***.

"...the place was crowded to suffocation. She commenced her lecture with astonishing firmness and composure., and seemed throughout to evince a spirit of devotedness to the cause she advocated which rose superior to the strange position which she, for the first time, occupied. The subject of her lecture was confined principally to the (notion that) feeling and principal should guide or actuate these who call-themselves Socialist. Her manner was peculiarly energetic, her arguments well arranged, and her remarks judiciously adapted to the occasion, and characterised by remarkable simplicity and delicacy. She was listened to with respectful attention and seemed to give general satisfaction. She is the first female in Manchester who had had the nerve to come forward in practical advocacy of our views, and it is hoped that her example will operate as stimulus to others to lend their exertions in promoting the great cause of socialism, whose interests are so completely identified with their own.



The Influence of the Present Marriage System Frances Morrison

In a published lecture Frances wrote about a new form of marriage. *“But in community, money will not be known, neither will the want of it be dreaded, for all that can minister to the comforts of life will be had in abundance. There will be no marrying for convenience merely (a very cold word), but real affection inspired by real and known worth on both sides.”* She enjoyed a long life and died in 1898.

Robert Owen held advanced views on feminism and marriage. Indeed his objections to marriage as distorting and degrading natural sexual instincts and relationships was not favourably received by many women, although others recognised the potential benefits, especially when he called for all domestic work and childcare to be organised and carried out on a communal basis. In general terms the Owenite movement was welcoming to women and encouraged their participation. The educational aspect of Owenism, encapsulated in his writing on the Rational Society led to 65 branches nationwide and the establishment of schools, libraries, meeting rooms and the publication, ***New Moral World***. Women published articles in the paper and gave lectures at the Owenite Halls of Science, often focussed on domestic matters. However, the Owenite movement in its utopian beliefs failed to connect with the wider class struggle and working class women were rarely involved, as far as one can see from the records.

One of the best surviving Owenite Halls of Science is in Liverpool That together with the print of one in Manchester show their grand scale and ambition.



Manchester hall of Science



Liverpool Hall of Science

The Chartist Movement

The role of women in the Chartist movement (1838-50) has, until recently largely remained hidden from view. The Charter itself only called for suffrage for all men over 21 years of age, despite many in the movement advocating votes for women. Nevertheless women participated in their thousands and took a prominent role in marching, banner making and general organising. The fact that they did not usually take leading speaker roles means that they are ignored in most histories.

Chartism is often portrayed as a male-dominated movement since they demanded universal suffrage for men only and the main leaders were all male. However, there were several prominent and brilliant women who played an important, often overlooked, role in furthering their cause. Some campaigned in support of The People's Charter in its presented form, while others such as **Anne Knight** (considered in more detail below) campaigned to change the Charter itself to include the enfranchisement of women. Historian Dorothy Thompson wrote that Chartist women rarely spoke on public platforms, but that they 'presented banners, made and presented gifts to visiting speakers and invariably marched in the great processions usually at the head'. Whilst this may be broadly true new research has shown that there were many female Chartist speakers of high quality who were much sought after to speak on Chartist platforms.

In most of the large towns in Britain, Chartist groups had women sections. The **East London Female Patriotic Association** published its objectives in October, 1839, and made it clear that they wanted to *"unite with our sisters in the country, and to use our best endeavours to assist our brethren in obtaining universal suffrage"*. The organisation made the point that they would use their power as managers of the household to obtain the vote for their men by *"dealing as much as possible with those shopkeepers who are favourable to the People's Charter"*.

These women's groups were often very large; the **Birmingham Charter Association** for example, had over 3,000 female members. The Northern Star reported on 27th April 1839, that the **Hyde Chartist Society** contained 300 men and 200 women. The newspaper quoted one of the male members as saying that the women were more militant than the men, or as he put it: *"the women were the better men"*. One of the most radical and militant women's groups of this period (1840s) was the **Female Political Union of Newcastle**. In a report of their activities a local report quoted a speaker...
"We have been told that the province of women is her home, and that the field of politics should be left to men; this we deny. It is not true that the interests of our fathers, husbands, and brothers, ought to be ours? If they are oppressed and impoverished, do we not share those evils with them? If so, ought we not to resent the infliction of those wrongs upon them? We have read the records of the past, and our hearts have responded to the historian's praise of those women, who struggled against tyranny and urged their countrymen to be free or die."

Elizabeth Hanson formed the **Elland Female Radical Association** in March, 1838. She argued *"it is our duty, both as wives and mothers, to form a Female Association, in order to give and receive instruction in political knowledge, and to co-operate with our husbands and sons in their great work of regeneration."* She became one of the movement's most effective speakers and one newspaper reported she *"melted the hearts and drew forth floods of tears"*. Her husband, Abram Hanson, acknowledged the importance of *"the women who are the best politicians, the best revolutionists, and the best political economists... should the men fail in their allegiance the women of Elland, who had sworn not to breed slaves, had registered a vow to do the work of men and women."*

Susanna Inge was another important figure in the Chartist movement. She wrote in an article for *The Northern Star* in July 1842, "As civilisation advances man becomes more inclined to place woman on an equality with himself, and though excluded from everything connected with public life, her condition is considerably improved". She went on to urge women to "assist those men who will, nay, who do, place women in on equality with themselves in gaining their rights, and yours will be gained also".



Susan Inge



Mary Ann Walker, leader of the London Female Radical Association, *Punch Magazine* (1842)

In October 1842, **Susanna Inge and Mary Ann Walker** attempted to establish a **Female Chartist Association**. Inge argued that in time women should be given the vote. However, she felt before this could happen women "ought to be better educated, and that, if she were, so far as mental capacity, she would in every respect be the equal of man".

The plan to form a Female Chartist Association was criticised by some male Chartists. One declared that he "did not consider that nature intended women to partake of political rights". He argued that women were "more happy in the peacefulness and usefulness of the domestic hearth, than in coming forth in public and aspiring after political rights". It was also suggested that if a "young gentleman" might try "to influence her vote through his sway over her affection". Mary Ann Walker responded by claiming that "she would treat with womanly scorn, as a contemptible scoundrel, the man who would dare to influence her vote by any undue and unworthy means; for if he were base enough to mislead her in one way, he would in another." In the end it seems that such an Association did not materialise.

Three of leading women chartists, **Elizabeth Pease, Jane Smeal and Anne Knight**, were Quakers. These women had also been involved in the anti-slavery campaign. Pease pointed out in a letter to a friend why she was active in the Chartist movement: "The grand principle of the natural equality of man - a principle alas almost buried, in the land, beneath the rubbish of an hereditary aristocracy and the force of a state religion. Working people are driven almost to desperation by those who consider they are but chattels made to minister to their luxury and add to their wealth."

Women who spoke at Chartist meetings were described in the national press as "she-orators". The *Sunday Observer* reported on a meeting where **Emma Matilda Miles** told the audience: "It was the duty of women to step forth, and, in all the majesty of her native dignity, assist her brother slaves in effecting the political redemption of the country. It was not ambition, it was not vanity that induced her to become a public woman; no, it was the oppression which had fallen upon every poor man's house that made her speak.... She did not doubt the ultimate success of Chartism any more than she doubted her own existence; but then it would not, as she said, be granted by the justice - no, it must be extorted from the fears of their oppressors".



Anne Knight, 1855

Anne Knight was the most outspoken of the women in the movement. In a letter published in the Brighton Herald in 1850 she demanded that the Chartists should campaign for what she described as "true universal suffrage". An anonymous leaflet was published in 1847. It has been persuasively argued that the author of the work was Anne Knight. In argued: *"Never will the nations of the earth be well governed, until both sexes, as well as all parties, are fully represented and have an influence, a voice, and a hand in the enactment and administration of the laws"*.

Anne Knight established the **Sheffield Female Political Association**. Their first meeting was held in Sheffield in February, 1851. Later that year it published an "Address to the Women of England". This was the first petition in England that demanded women's suffrage. It was presented to the House of Lords by George Howard, 7th Earl of Carlisle.

I hope that this brief survey shows that the role of women in the early history of our movement was extremely important and pioneering work. We should salute these brave women and all the many other women who gave so much to the struggle.

Part 2 of this essay will look at the role of women in the socialist parties in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Part 3 will consider women's role in the trade union movement and the struggle to improve working conditions.

*Derek Gunby
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