

PRIMARY SOURCE EXTRACTS

MARION REID (1815-1902) Reid published her *Plea for Women* shortly after attending the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840. It was probably the first work in Britain or the USA to give priority to achieving civil and political rights for women.

Mrs Hugo [Marion] Reid, *A Plea for Woman: being a vindication of the importance and extent of her natural sphere of action; with remarks on recent works on the subject* (Edinburgh: William Tait; London: Simpkin, Marshall & Co; Dublin: John Cumming, 1843)

Chapter V. Woman's Claim to Equal Rights

“To see one half of the human race excluded by the other from all participation of government, is a political phenomenon which, according to abstract principles, it is impossible to explain” – Talleyrand

...

The ground on which equality is claimed for all men is of equal force for all women; for women share the common nature of humanity, and are possessed of all those noble faculties which constitute man a responsible being, and give him a claim to be his own ruler, so far as is consistent with order, and the possession of the like degree of sovereignty over himself by every other human being. It is the possession of the noble faculties of reason and conscience which elevates man above the brutes, and invests him with this right of exercising supreme authority over himself. It is more especially the possession of an inward rule of rectitude, a law written on the heart in indelible characters, which raises him to this high dignity, and renders him an accountable being, by impressing him with the conviction that there are certain duties which he owes to his fellow-creatures. Whoever possesses this consciousness, has also the belief that the same convictions of duty are implanted in the breast of each member of the human family. He feels that he has a *right* to have all those duties exercised by others towards him, which his conscience tells him he ought to exercise towards others; hence the natural and equal rights of men.

We do not mean to enter into the question of the claim of all men to equal rights, but simply to state the foundation on which that claim rests, and to show that the first principles on which it does rest apply to all mankind, without distinction of sex...

Our readers will, doubtless, soon observe, that throughout all the arguments we have used in these pages runs the idea of the equal right of all men to be represented – actually and really represented – in Parliament... Of course, we do not mean that all women should possess a privilege which has, at yet, only been conferred on particular classes of men; we only mean to insist that the right is the same in both sexes. If there be any particular reason for the exclusion from this privilege of a certain class among men, we would allow it to have weight for excluding the corresponding class of women, but for these alone. ...

JOHN STUART MILL (1806-1873), philosopher, economist, and advocate of women's rights, Liberal MP for Westminster 1865-1868. In 1867 he put forward an amendment to Disraeli's Suffrage Bill, proposing the substitution of 'person' for 'man' – the amendment was defeated.

Speech of the late John Stuart Mill at the Great Meeting in Favour of Women's Suffrage held in the Music Hall, Edinburgh, January 12th, 1871 (n.d. To be obtained from the Secretary, London Society for Women's Suffrage, 25, Victoria Street, S. W.)

....

All our recent constitutional reforms, and the whole creed of reformers, are grounded on the fact that the suffrage is needed for self-protection. All experience proves that if one part of the community is held in subjection by another part, it is not trusted with the ordinary means of self-defence, but is left dependent on the good-will and pleasure of those who are more privileged, the most vital interests of the subject-portion are certain to be, if not recklessly trampled upon, at least postponed to almost anything else.

The treatment of women is certainly no exception to the rule. They have neither equal laws nor an equal administration of them. The laws treat them as they could not long be treated if they had the suffrage; and even if the laws were equal, the administration of the laws is not. Police Magistrates and criminal judges cannot be exceptionally bad men; they are not chosen for their bad qualities; they must be thought, by those who appoint them, to represent fairly, or better than fairly, the moral feelings of average men. Yet, what do we see? For an atrocious assault by a man upon a woman, especially if she has the misfortune to be his wife, he is either let off with an admonition, or he is solemnly told that he has committed a grave offence, for which he must be severely punished, and then he gets as many weeks, or months of imprisonment as a man who has taken five pounds' worth of property gets years.

We are told that the good feelings of men are a sufficient protection to women. Those who say so can never, one would suppose, look into the police and law reports. If good feeling does not protect women against being beaten and kicked to death's door every day of their lives, and at last beaten and kicked to actual death by their special guardians and protectors, can we expect that it will secure them against injuries less revolting to humanity? Most men, it will be said, are incapable of committing such horrible brutality. Perhaps so; but it seems they are quite capable of letting it be committed. If women who are maltreated by their husbands found a defender in every other man who knew of it, they might have some chance of protection without the weapon of the suffrage. But it is never so; slaves did not find it so; serfs did not find it so; conquered nations do not find it so; and neither do women. There are many men who would not consciously do them any wrong; but there must be a great moral improvement in human nature before most men will exert themselves to prevent or redress wrongs committed by others under the sanction of law. And of these two things – the suffrage for woman, and a grand moral improvement in human nature – the suffrage, to my thinking, is likely to be the soonest obtained. (Cheers.) ...

FLORA MASSON (1856-1937) was a member of the Ladies' Edinburgh Debating Society and campaigner for women's suffrage.

Flora Masson, *The Ladies Edinburgh Magazine*, 1876, Vol. II, pp. 97-102

Woman's Work, VII – The Parliamentary Franchise for Women

... At this time there are many questions under discussion relating to the employment, education, property and treatment of women, which of course are of more immediate interest to women themselves than to men. Some people assert that the interests of men and women ought to be identified. They *ought* to be perhaps, but they are not; it is constantly found that laws have to be made for the protection of women, their lives and property, and it cannot be right that those laws should be made entirely by men, who are chosen by men. ...

It is sometimes said that, if the franchise were extended to women, they would become unwomanly, and would neglect their household cares, and we should indeed be sorry if this were the case. But of such evils we must not prophesy, but judge from our experience; and we have had a good deal of experience to help us. Women in England do vote at present at municipal elections (they are debarred from doing so in Scotland, because the municipal vote here carries with it the right of Parliamentary voting). They are allowed to vote in both England and Scotland at School Board elections; and in none of these cases have evil results been seen. No ugly transformation has occurred among the women of Edinburgh since three years ago, when they went up in large numbers to the polling-booths and voted for members of the School Board.

BRITISH WOMEN'S TEMPERANCE ASSOCIATION (SCOTTISH CHRISTIAN UNION), established in 1876, attracted a large membership from across Scotland.

Scottish Women's Temperance News, No 7, vol X, July 1906

Deputation to the Prime Minister on Women's Suffrage

This deputation has been so largely discussed in the daily press, and so universally reported, that it is unnecessary to go into details. ... Our membership now stands at 52,000. Scotland has

contributed already in large measure to the progressive Parliament we now have. It has almost unanimously sent members to the present HC[House of Commons] pledged to social and temperance reform. We feel that legislation is being brought more and more face to face with social and economic problems – problems in which women would be most valuable. We have already proved our worth on School Boards, Parish Councils, and many other public bodies. There are many questions before the country in which we, as Scottish women, feel we ought to have a voice. From the temperance point of view, we feel that the termination of all vested interests in licenses, after a short time-limit, is a question we ought to speak about. We feel, also, the concession of direct power to inhabitants, to control the issue and renewal of licenses, is surely a question in which women ought to be able to judge. ...

CHRISTAL MACMILLAN (1872-1937), suffragist and pacifist, was secretary of the Women Graduates of Scottish Universities Committee, which argued that women graduates should have the right to vote in the university constituencies. Their case was rejected by the Court of Session and, on appeal, by the House of Lords.

Chrystal Macmillan, *The Struggle for Political Liberty* (The Woman's Press, 4, Clement's Inn, Strand WC, 1909)

Men resist the claims of women professedly on the ground that they are acting, not only for the good of the country, but for the good of women themselves, and because they are anxious to save women from responsibility. Men base their claim on the natural order of things – sometimes even on divine order – forgetting that right is merely hereditary and founded on custom, and that what seems to their limited outlook to be the natural order of things is no more than the political custom of our own time and country. Women have to face the further difficulty that they are not yet recognised as ‘the people’...Be the franchise wide or limited, it must not exclude women on the ground of sex. Women demand that they should be recognised as ‘the people’.

...

The Scottish Graduates Case

...‘Women’ are not ‘persons’. Here again we have the purely arbitrary setting aside of the obvious interpretation of the law. The interpretation by the House of Lords, when applied to the statutes in question, produces contradictions and absurdities in these statutes. It was denied that the meaning of the statutes is to be inferred from them, as they stand. And why? Because the privilege is so exceptional, because it is a fundamental constitutional law and principle of the Constitution that women do not vote – a principle!

The highest court in the land has decided that courts of law may, at their discretion, draw an arbitrary line saying so much we may infer from the statutes and no more...

We need today, as men did seven hundred years ago, a great Charter setting forth the rights of women:

- That women as well as men are the people
- That privileges shall not be denied to women simply because they are great
- That women shall not be taxed without consent
- That Government be established deriving just powers from the consent of the governed, both men and women
- That such a Government can only be established by giving Votes to Women.

SUFFRAGE ORGANISATIONS

Scotsman, 18 Feb, 1918

ENFRANCHISEMENT OF WOMEN THANKSGIVING SERVICE IN EDINBURGH

A united service of thanksgiving for the enfranchisement of women was held under the auspices of the various Edinburgh suffrage societies in the Synod Hall, Edinburgh, on Saturday afternoon. Rev. Dr R. J. Drummond, Moderator-Designate of the United Free Church, presided over a large gathering. ... The societies represented were: - National Union, Women's Freedom League, Conservative and Unionist Women's Franchise, United Suffragists, Northern Men's Federation, University Graduates, Churches League.

...

The Chairman, in his opening remarks, referred to his audience as “fellow-electors.” He said that women had now a large share, not yet an equal share, in the election of members of Parliament. They were not there to repine over what seemed the meaningless distinction between a lad of nineteen in khaki, who might have the vote, and a woman who supplied him with munitions, and who might not have the vote. It had been through the terrible discipline of war that women had ultimately secured that recognition of what was always their right. Women had proved themselves worthy of a voice in the affairs of the nation. ...

SOCIETY FOR EQUAL CITIZENSHIP AND WOMEN CITIZEN'S ASSOCIATIONS

Scotsman, 2 Oct, 1926

EQUAL FRANCHISE RESTRICTIVE LAWS FEMINISTS IN CONCLAVE

An autumn school organised by the Edinburgh National Society for Equal Citizenship, in co-operation with the Glasgow Society for Equal Citizenship and the Glasgow Women Citizens' Association, is being held this week-end Equal franchise and equal pay and opportunities were the principal subjects on the programme yesterday. To-day family allowances and Bills before Parliament affecting women will be considered.

... Lady Balfour of Burleigh spoke on equal franchise – the most important reform of all, she said, because it was the key to the others. This was the only country which, having decided to give women the vote, had not given it to them on the same terms as men. The position was absurd. That it was still tolerated she attributed to prejudice, lack of co-operation, and general prejudice. ... The biggest of all was sex prejudice, but there was also the prejudice of the older people towards the young. ... There was also an argument that there would be a preponderance of women if equal franchise were granted, and that there would be a petticoat Government. Petticoat government might not be a good thing in itself, but she did not know if it would be any less desirable than trouser government. (Laughter.) If there were two million more women than men in the country, that was the very reason why they should have the preponderance of the vote. They could not pretend to be a democracy if they kept five million women unenfranchised. (Applause.)

WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS

Scotsman, 1 November, 1928

WOMEN'S VOTE EDINBURGH CELEBRATIONS

A mass celebration of the enfranchisement of women, organised by over thirty women's and young people's societies, was held last night in the Usher Hall, Edinburgh.

Lady Frances Balfour, LL.D, D. Litt., vice-president of the National Council of Women of Great Britain, occupied the chair. They had come together, she said, to celebrate the victory of the woman's movement. It was not a movement for any but serious thought. The younger women did not want any instruction. They had been instructed until they were perfectly sick of it. They had been told that they were everything from monsters to sirens. When they came to compare the two sexes, they would find very little difference in their follies or their wisdom. The women were going to do the commonsense thing, and the best for the country. There was no particular fear of this extraordinary collection who were going to be added to the menagerie of voters. To-night they were remembering the women who had gone before them, whose strength was made perfect in weakness, such as Elizabeth Fry, Beecher Stowe, Florence Nightingale, Elsie Inglis, Mrs Pethick-Lawrence. Let them take the memory of their patience, and their prayers, and let them go forward, fearing nothing, because there was nothing to fear. Their brethren were one with them. When that day came when they first cast their votes, might it be for a happier and brighter country, without attacking men, with less thought of self and more for the good of the community. (Applause).

....

Miss Jenny Lee, introduced by the chairman as “one of the monstrous regiment of younger women who are coming into the vote,” expressed the gratitude of the younger women to the pioneers. “We thank you,” she said, “for having borne the brunt of the battle for us, and for having outlined some of things it will be worth our while to fight for.” All the young women who were worth talking about were concerned about the children. Child life required protection, and the danger of war was not removed from the world. These two things were big enough for the younger women to put the same courage and fire and work into as the older women had put into the work of winning their opportunities for them. (Applause.)