

3. Liberation, Licentiousness & The Law

Jobs for the boys

Working in munitions factories during the war opened up a new world for women, with fixed and more social hours, better pay and conditions, and a special camaraderie, in contrast to a life '*Below Stairs*,' the title of a book by Margaret Powell. Once, on handing her employer a letter, she was instantly rebuked. "Never, never, never, on any occasion hand me anything in your bare hands; always use a silver salver."

As women sought careers other than in domestic service, skill shortages taxed the minds of the government and lady of the house. Coping with fewer servants and surly attitudes was underscored in *The Diary of a Provincial Lady*. (1930) but efforts were often hampered by the Restoration of Pre-war Practices Act. Employees in munitions factories had no alternative but to leave, consigning 770,000 women to the unemployment register.

Home-making was the mantra with magazines galore. *Good Housekeeping* and *Woman and Home* were especially popular. Adorning magazine racks from the 1930s also were the well-designed *Women's Own*, *Women's Illustrated* and *Woman* that appealed to younger women. The content focused on romantic fiction, marriage tips, fashion, beauty & health, baby care, knitting & dress-making and gardening. By 1931 household appliances were much in use in wealthier households: 1.3 million electric cookers, 400,000 vacuum cleaners, 220,000 fridges and 60,000 washing machines. Gradually, those in domestic service increased to 1.6 million but this was still below pre-war levels.

Fame had its limits. Stars such as Gracie Fields and Mary Pickford were acceptable but not women in male bastion roles, especially Fay Tylour a racing driver, Gertrude Ederle, the first woman to swim the Channel (1926), pilots Lady Heath and Lady Bailey who flew the London to Capetown route, and not least Amy Johnson with her solo flight to Australia in 1930. Little mention was made of political pioneers, notably the first woman MP, Nancy Astor (1919), the first Cabinet Minister, Margaret Bondfield (1929) and the younger MPs Ellen Wilkinson, Jennie Lee and Megan Lloyd-George. The New Years Honours List for January 1926, comprising over 100 names for more substantial honours, included only one woman, for services to India.

Although many magazines had female editors, feminist issues were played in a low key. Their priority was circulation. When the first 'Evelyn Home' advised an unhappily married reader to spend a weekend with her lover, her copy was promptly censored and the author removed. For the magazine *Woman*, employment was viewed as preparation for marriage, not a career. *Good Housekeeping*, owned by William Randolph Hearst, saw the title as a worthy profession. The magazine even offered a correspondence course in domestic management that included use of new mechanical devices tested by their very own Institute. Don't rock the boat meant being sensitive to wider reactions such as articles on birth control and anything too racy.

Chauvinistic attitudes remained entrenched in industry and the professions, especially with a sluggish economy in the depression years. Car manufacturer Sir Herbert Austin, and MP for Kings Norton, was vehement. Women ought to be sacked to alleviate unemployment (of men), a view shared by many employers. Some women opted not to register for work, not helped by the declining textile industry and discriminatory practice of a marriage bar, widely adopted by local authorities and other public bodies. Teachers, doctors, nurses and cleaners, by way of example, were sacked as soon as they married, contravening the ineffective 1919

Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act. A novel way of attempting to overcome this was non-declaration of marriage but even so 4% of female civil servants lost their jobs each year.

An assumption was a man had a wife and dependent children to support, oblivious to the fact that many women had disabled husbands, or had otherwise lost them during the war. The trade unions promoted 'protective legislation,' designed to safeguard the health and morals of women, but this often excluded them from occupations such as paint manufacture and night work, and any job exceeding 48 hours a week.

Women comprised 35% of the labour force in 1931, almost identical to 1911, even allowing for structural changes in the economy with a growth in secretarial and administrative jobs. Only 116 women were practising solicitors by 1935 and 39 as barristers. Progress was made in the medical profession as female doctors had grown over fivefold compared with 1914 but this masked that almost all were GPs. Consultant posts were largely reserved for men.

A working class study in Lancashire towns showed that many women viewed employment as working until their mid to late twenties only, with no thought of a career. That was seen as the preserve of middle classes. In raising a family, the expectation was that men would be the bread-winner. The habit remained of passing over an unopened pay packet and for the wife to dole out money for beer, tobacco and betting. A backstop was always the pawnbroker if a husband erred and blew the family wages.

The pursuit of equality

Many feminists found new attitudes towards fashion and a liberal society repugnant, a view shared by Emmeline Pankhurst. Her daughter Sylvia was scathing in her indictment. "The emancipation of today displays itself mostly in cigarettes and shorts and painted lips and nails, and return of trailing skirts and other absurdities of dress which betoken the slave-woman's sex appeal, rather than the free woman's intelligent companionship." This might have been a swipe at new feminism promoted by the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship that replaced the Womens' Suffrage movement, instrumental in launching *Time and Tide* in 1920. This gave a platform to feminist writers, including Rebecca West, Vera Brittain, Virginia Woolf and Rose Macaulay.

Society objectives included full voting rights, equal pay, equal rights of guardianship, divorce law reform, and opening up of the professions, local government and civil service on an equal footing with men. Many of these issues were old sores such as giving the vote only to women on attaining the age of 30, as if deemed incapable of exercising mature judgement at the age of 21, unlike men. A similar mentality applied to divorce, custody of children and women who had career ambitions. Shifting well entrenched mindsets meant the gradual chipping away to achieve progressive reform.

The Society for Equal Citizenship expanded their agenda to included family allowances, birth control and opposition to protective legislation, whilst accepting most women wished to marry and have children. Regarded as suffragists, the Society was proactive and drew up a blacklist of MPs with a poor record on women's issues, hoping to defeat them at the ballot box. All three major parties sought to involve women more, especially after voting equality with men was achieved in 1928 though safe seats were still reserved for men.

Whilst some concessions were made to health and welfare reform, there was little appetite to address equality issues in particular. The Labour Party refused to endorse family allowances for fear that men's wages might be adversely affected by taxation, whilst birth control would

upset the Catholic Church. "Today the battle we thought won is going badly," Cicely Hamilton said in 1935. "We are retreating where we once advanced." Replacing Society membership was vital but where were the younger generations? Many had a different outlook in forging a career rather than seeking change.

In an address to female Cambridge students in 1928, published as *A Room of One's Own* in 1929, Virginia Woolf was emphatic. "May I also remind you that most of the professions have been open to you for close on ten years now. There must, at this moment, be some 2,000 women capable of earning £500 a year, in one way or another. You will agree that the excuse of lack of opportunity, training, employment, leisure and money no longer holds good." The message was clear. Women had to be more assertive and resilient in the face of male intransigence and preservation of the status quo.

The emphasis on employment crystallized the growing gap between former suffragettes and suffragists and modern feminism. Vera Brittain left the Society, otherwise known as the Six Point Group, to join the League of Nations Union and the Labour Party. University educated and actively progressing a career, she proudly insisted, "One happily married wife and mother is worth more to feminism than a dozen eloquent and gifted spinsters." The young Jennie Lee and Barbara Castle echoed the importance of career and aspiration, whilst acknowledging that women had to be more feisty and resilient to compete in a man's world.

Many women's groups appealed to popular tastes and found a ready market. A Co-op Guild was one, reaching out to working class women and exhorting them to become involved in public duty and to acquire practical skills. Membership of 31,000 in 1914 rose to 67,000 by 1931. Consumption rather than production was a prime weapon of change in spending the household budget and helping to distribute Co-op profits. The Guild also endorsed most of the Six Point Group demands.

This era also saw a rapid expansion of Women's Institutes with a membership of 318,000 by 1937, with a fine line drawn between feminism and twin roles of citizenship and domesticity. The annual gathering of some 5,000 delegates was known as the Countryside Parliament with much lobbying for change and improvement. Topics ranged from rural libraries, telephones and water supplies to cheap electricity, children's milk, cinema censorship and women police. Its success prompted the Society for Equal Citizenship to set up Townswomen's Guilds with a membership of 54,000 by 1939. Action was not militant but community focused with the aim of improving the living conditions of British society. It was a fundamental shift.

Sex & sexuality

Around 1914, discussion of attitudes towards sex and sexuality was mainly for intellectuals such as George Bernard Shaw, Dora & Bertrand Russell, H.G. Wells and Edward Carpenter who, with Laurence Houseman, founded the British Society for the Study of Sex Psychology. Dora Marsden and Dora Russell advocated female choice whether or not to use birth control and Freud entered the debate too, insisting matters concerning sex should be discussed more freely and openly. Sex was no longer a taboo subject.

Morality entered the debate too, especially as thousands of war babies were left behind when troops headed across the Channel. Kitchener's strong advice to spurn the twin temptations of drink and women fell on deaf ears. Some 20% of troops returned with venereal disease in spite of condoms being issued. The reluctance to use them applied to marriage too.

Older generations were unsettled by gender assimilation, not only in similar jobs in factories but driving lorries and wearing uniforms. There was something unnerving for many as the case of Valerie Arkell-Smith illustrated. As an ambulance driver she preferred to dress as a man and to be treated as one. In 1923 she left her husband Harold and eloped with a Miss Hayward to Brighton, staying at the Grand Hotel. They married at St Peter's Church in secret and lived in Hove. She then left her wife for another woman and moved to Soho. After being involved in bankruptcy proceedings the fraudulent marriage then came to light. Valerie Arkell-Smith was sent to Holloway on remand before being prosecuted for making a false declaration on a marriage certificate.

When MPs debated the Criminal Law Amendment Bill in 1921 they voted by a majority of 3:1 to criminalise sexual acts between women. Sir Ernest Wild informed MPs that asylum doctors had told him that institutions were "largely populated by nymphomaniacs." Lt Col Moore-Brabazon, not in favour of legislation, insisted the cause lay in "abnormalities of the brain." In the event, the House of Lords rejected the proposal to criminalise such acts. Wealthy lesbians kept a low profile.

The marriage of Vita Sackville-West to diplomat Harold Nicolson was a loving partnership that lasted until Vita's death in 1962. They felt their marriage a great success. "Vita is absolutely devoted to Harold," said her mother, "but there is nothing sexual between them. She is not in the least jealous of him and allows him to relieve himself with anyone." Biographies and letters reveal that both Vita and Harold had numerous same-sex relationships during their life together. Vita saw nothing shocking in Harold's attraction for men whilst Vita had several serious relationships, most famously with Virginia Woolf and Violet Trefusis.

Many famous novelists and poets limited partners to their own social class including Stephen Spender, Christopher Isherwood, Siegfried Sassoon and E.M. Forster. Some were attracted by the more open society of the Weimar Republic such as Francis Bacon. "Berlin is the only place for sex," observed an associate of Stephen Spender. For many the uninhibited and camp Noel Coward was too much. Amongst his flirtations was Dickie Mountbatten with letters signed, "love and kisses, bosun Coward." But he was circumspect in his relations, well aware what befell Oscar Wilde and any threat of blackmail.

Whereas only 19% of women had pre-marital sex in 1904, within twenty years this doubled. Most couples lacked any education about sex and childbirth. Falling childbirth focused minds in the USSR with a gold medal of Soviet Motherhood awarded to mothers of ten children. As if trying to match this, the News of the World offered a free willow-pattern tea tray! Germany had more pragmatic solutions with loans and tax relief and the imposition of higher taxes on childless couples.

Under the Maternity and Child Welfare Act, 1918, maternity and child welfare clinics were set up and by 1937 they were attended by 54% of mothers. From the 1930s free milk was given too. Having large families was not only costly but increased the incidence of infant mortality, as well as impairing the health of mothers. Marie Stopes book, *Married Love*, first published in March 1918, was the definitive text on birth control. By 1939, over one million copies had been sold.

Relationships, she insisted, were now more rewarding and satisfying, now the fear element had been removed. An economic argument was advanced too as the health of babies would be improved with smaller and more widely spaced families. The helped counter the argument that birth control reduced population growth below an acceptable level. Underlying this was a

concern not so much a population explosion but the health, well-being and fitness of children in mind as well as body. The subject of eugenics was never far beneath the surface.

Even though illegal, abortion was high, involving as many as 20% of all pregnancies, birth control advice and methods had only a limited effect, more especially amongst the working classes through lack of knowledge, entrenched views and cost. Clinics were not allowed to dispense advice, regarded as ultra vires since the Act did not specify this.

There was another reason. Strong opposition came from the Catholic Church and in the Commons, led by Nancy Astor who felt this would debase moral standards. The B.M.A. were not in favour initially, nor some gynaecologists who felt the health of women might well be impaired. In the early 1930s the government gave way, though advice was only for women whose health might otherwise be in jeopardy.

Eventually, in 1937, local authorities were given discretionary powers to dispense advice in clinics. Only about a quarter took advantage but by this time voluntary clinics had appeared to augment public provision. In 1939 the National Birth Control Council had a new name: The Family Planning Association. In two decades the population of Britain had increased by 3.8 million thus allaying fears of population decline. The government may have claimed success – largely through its own inertia and non-action to promote birth control!

Marriage and infidelity

The Great War had deprived a generation of young women the lives of 740,000 men that only added to an imbalance. With this excess of females there was talk of emigration schemes, reminiscent of Victoria times when of those leaving Britain two-thirds were men. Working in munitions factories during the war, and achieving voting equality in 1928, created a heady atmosphere. Life seemed different now and was.

The Daily Express and Daily Mail seized on the new liberation of women and especially fun-loving 'flappers, besotted with short skirts or gaudy dresses and dalliances with sharp-dressed men labelled aesthetes. Marriage was a distraction but magazines promoted its virtues, "the best job of all." *My Weekly* debated if a woman should propose. A majority responded yes as returning soldiers were distracted by their wartime experiences.

Types of employment likely to lure husbands included nursing, libraries work and a telephone switchboard, attracted by a voice on the phone. The propaganda worked, helped too by the prospect, eventually, of a home of your own. By the 1930s more women in their teens and twenties were getting married compared to pre-war; over 90% of women and men by the age of 49, an increase of 4% - 5%.

The message was reinforced by Walter Greenwood's *Love On The Dole*. Marriage triumphs over adversity. Parental influence was waning as some couples just decided for themselves. The upper classes still relied on the 'coming out' season with ritual lunches, tea-parties and balls. Some girls might go three years without finding a husband, or otherwise become disillusioned by the immaturity of potential suitors.

In her book, *Married Love*, published in 1918, Marie Stopes painted a very positive picture of marriage, now without the fear of pregnancy and unwanted children. Women, on average, had half the number of children compared to the Victoria era and completed child-rearing by the age of 28. As well as improved health, higher standards of housing made life much more tolerable with increased leisure time to enjoy life together whether at home decorating, in the

garden or going to the cinema, rather than a husband disappearing with his pals almost every night down to the local pub or wherever.

The first big society wedding post-war was between Diana Manners and Duff Cooper in 1919. An aristocrat, glamorous actress and society figure, and known better as Viscountess Norwich, she had an innate warmth said her son, John Julius. She married a moneyless Conservative MP who was a trusted lieutenant of Winston Churchill, and likewise an anti-appeaser. Her family were horrified when they then set up home in Bloomsbury, rather than Belgravia or Mayfair. The marriage was deemed a success, despite Duff-Cooper's perennial philandering. "If he saw a woman who attracted him, he laid siege with every device; his success rate was very high."

Even more spectacular was the wedding in 1922 of Edwina Ashley, grand-daughter of wealthy Sir Ernest Cassel to Dickie Mountbatten at Brook House in Park Lane. The bride's trousseau came in for intense scrutiny by gossip columnists and even more her lingerie with a special display arranged in the Dover Street offices of manufacturers Savigny and David. Edwina soon became bored by his long absences overseas, consoling herself with dozens of admirers, known as 'ginks' in Mountbatten circles; contemptuous, foolish and hangers on. Within a few years a series of series affairs began and the marriage collapsed. There was even talk of an affair with Douglas Fairbanks and Paul Robeson too.

Whilst adultery was accepted by the upper classes, the expectation was to be discreet. Wallis Simpson was a divorced woman whose husband was still alive and the behaviour of the Prince of Wales too came in for much criticism. The indiscretions of prime ministers was deemed somehow more acceptable. Observed Margot Asquith, "I not only encouraged female friends but posted letters to them if I found them in my front hall." Her husband Herbert was rather more preoccupied with writing an astonishing 560 letters to his mistress Venetia Stanley. One said, "Without you I am only half a pair of scissors. I love you more than words can tell," before signing off with, "your devoted lover." Churchill was appalled. So was Clementine for very different reasons. Asquith had a penchant for staring down cleavages and was known to grab a ladies hand beneath the dining table at functions and thrust it into his trousers.

Ramsey MacDonald, who lost his wife in 1911, had an affair with Edith, the Marchioness of Londonderry, when they met at a Buckingham Palace dinner in 1924. A private man, he was easily flattered and soon fell for the charms of a society hostess. Their exchange of letters appeared to reveal a sentimental relationship rather than sexual. It is quite possible that all MacDonald really sought was trusted companionship, unlike the Olympian standards of serial philanderers such as Duff-Cooper, Sir Oswald Moseley, Lord Londonderry and David Lloyd George, to name a few.

Lloyd George's relationship with Frances Stevenson started in 1913 and continued for thirty years until the death of his wife Margaret, whereupon he married Frances. Whilst Margaret was ensconced in North Wales he ran his second home with Frances in Surrey. With a degree from Royal Holloway College, she shared his intense interest in politics and was content to be his secretary, and mistress too. For a senior politicians, casual sex posed few risks as divorce was seldom if ever contemplated. The press were well aware of most goings-on.

The magazine *Woman's Own* had something to say on infidelity and in understanding male psychology. "Men get these attacks like kiddies get the measles. Let him have his fling and he'll come back a thousand times more in love with you than ever." Besides, there were the children to consider, an argument often used if a wife contemplated divorce. Many couples

believed in the vow, 'till death do us part,' but only the Catholic church was firmly opposed to divorce though the Church of England was against in principle.

Steps towards divorce reform

In the early 1920s divorces were running at about 2,800 a year, rising to over 4,000 by the early 1930s. A mere 2% of marriages of twenty years or more ended in divorce in 1926. This tripled to 6% by 1936. This was still a very low figure that said much for the restricted grounds, complications, social stigma of divorce and cost.

A problem with the Matrimonial Causes Act 1857 was that a wife had to prove aggravated adultery. This meant not only adultery but incest, cruelty, bigamy, sodomy or desertion. The stipulation was abolished in 1923 but the law still required one guilty party and one innocent. As Lord Chief Justice Hewart explained, "If one of two married persons is guilty of misconduct there may properly be a divorce, while if both are guilty, they must continue to abide in the holy estate of matrimony."

Holy Deadlock was the title of a satirical novel by MP and author, A.P. Herbert in which he highlights the inadequacies and absurdities of divorce law that appeared to condone acts of adultery and perjury. "Pardon me, Mr. Adam, but have either of you committed adultery? We are not here, Mr. Adam, to secure your happiness, but to preserve the institution of marriage and purity of the home. And therefore one of you must commit adultery; someone has to behave impurely in order to uphold the Christian idea of purity, and someone has to confess in public to a sinful breach of the marriage vows in order that the happily married may point at him or her and feel themselves secure and virtuous."

The ingenious plot ends with a virtuous, truthful and unassuming John Adam being seen with a prostitute, saying he intends to behave like a gentleman at last. A reflective legal profession was inclined to agree. "Just an ordinary English collusive divorce case—thousands like them every year. And all goes well until people start telling the truth. *Your* part of it—the part that was all lies from beginning to end—oh, yes, I know—isn't questioned at all."

The Matrimonial Causes Act 1937, based on A.P. Herbert's private member's bill introduced into the Commons, provided three further grounds for divorce: cruelty, desertion for at least three years, and incurable insanity. The emphasis was still on proving a matrimonial offence, except in the case of insanity. Condoning and connivance remained as legal bars that also applied to any divorce within the first three years of marriage.

Flaws soon became apparent and, as often is the case with major reform, rectification comes only in increments. It seemed wrong to many to insist on preserving a marriage that seemed no longer to exist in any real sense. Proving a matrimonial offence appeared out of touch as many marriages break down because of minor faults by both parties. Absurdities continued. The common practice of producing evidence, such as an overnight stay in a Brighton hotel, brought the law as a whole into disrepute.