

British Feminism and the Anti-slavery Movement

A transatlantic perspective

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ABSTRACT: In recent years universities in the UK have been investigating the extent to which they might have benefitted from the Atlantic slave trade between the 17th and the early 19th centuries. Of course, it emerges that those benefits have long been contested and it is therefore also relevant to investigate the anti-slavery views and actions of some of those involved. This paper focuses on the main founder of the first residential institution of higher education for women in Britain, Emily Davies, and thus opens up a broader inquiry into the theme of women and the anti-slavery movement in 19th century Britain. The anti-slavery movement was the first major campaign in which British women became involved, beginning as early as the late 18th century and reaching peaks in the 1830s and 1860s. So, the women who formed the first generation of British feminists in the middle of the 19th century were deeply shaped by what they had seen the women of their parents' and grandparents' generations doing in campaigning for abolition: first of the British slave trade, next of chattel slavery on British territories and then of slavery in the United States. For all these age groups it became common to compare the position of middle-class women, particularly those who were married, with the position of black slaves. As a result, the American Civil War had a galvanizing impact on British women activists. The Ladies' London Emancipation Society, set up in 1863 to propagandize for the Northern case against chattel slavery, became a central focal point for a network which went on to mount important domestic campaigns to improve their own situation in Britain: including the first movement for the extension of the vote to women and the establishment of the first residential college of higher education for women. In this way, the

anti-slavery movement was not just one issue among many that early women activists were concerned about: it was the central issue which shaped the nature and the timing of the emergence of the feminist movement in British public life.

KEYWORDS: Feminism, abolitionism, anti-slavery, higher education, British history

논문초록: 최근 수 년 동안 영국의 여러 대학은 18세기에서 19세기 초까지 대서양 노예무역에서 취했을 가능성이 있는 이득의 정도를 살펴보고 있다. 물론 이러한 이득에 대한 반론이 오랫동안 제기되어 왔기에, 노예제 반대 운동에 관여한 이들의 관점과 행동에 대한 연구도 유의미할 것이다. 이에 본 연구는 영국 최초의 여성 고등교육 기관 창립을 주도한 에밀리 데이비스(Emily Davies)을 중심으로 19세기 영국의 여성과 노예제 반대 운동을 주제로 한 광범위한 탐구에 나서고자 한다. 노예제 반대 운동은 영국 여성이 참여한 최초의 대규모 운동으로, 18세기 말에 시작해 1830~1860년대에 정점을 이뤘다. 따라서 19세기 중반 영국의 1세대 여성주의자가 된 여성들에게 커다란 영향을 미친 요소는 바로 부모 및 조부모 세대 여성의 노예제 폐지 운동 참여를 지켜본 경험이었다. 첫 번째는 영국 노예무역 폐지 운동이었고, 다음은 영국령 지역의 동산 노예제 반대 운동이었으며, 미국 노예제 폐지 운동이 그 뒤를 이었다. 모든 연령대에서 중산층 여성, 특히 기혼 여성과 흑인 노예의 위치 비교가 흔하게 이루어졌다. 그렇기에 미국의 남북전쟁은 영국 여성운동가들에게 큰 충격을 주었다. 런던 여성해방회(Ladies' London Emancipation Society)는 동산 노예제 폐지에 대한 북부의 대의를 선전하고자 1863년 창립된 단체로, 이를 구심점 삼아 구축된 네트워크는 이후 영국 내 상황 개선을 위해 중요한 국내 운동을 조직해 나갔다. 최초의 여성 참정권 확대 운동, 최초의 여성 고등교육 기관 설립 운동 등이 대표적이다. 그렇기에 노예제 반대 운동은 초기 여성운동가들이 관심을 가졌던 수많은 이슈 중 하나가 아니라, 영국의 공공 영역에서 진행된 여성주의 운동의 특성과 부상 시점을 결정지는 핵심 이슈라 할 수 있다.

핵심어: 여성주의, 노예제 폐지론, 노예제 반대, 고등교육, 영국 역사

1. Introduction

Under the stimulus of the Black Lives Matter movement, older universities in the UK have begun to investigate the extent to which they might have

benefitted both financially and in terms of material objects from the Atlantic slave trade between the 17th and the early-19th centuries. Of course, it emerges that any such benefits were already being contested at the time: anti-slavery opinions and campaigns are by no means new phenomena. For a complete picture of the history of black lives in Britain both sides of the debate need to be considered carefully. This contribution approaches the issue by investigating the main founder of the first residential institution of higher education for women in Britain, Emily Davies, who played a key role in establishing Girton College in 1869. It opens up a number of themes about the nature of women's involvement in the anti-slavery movement: looking both at their impact on that movement and at the contribution their involvement in it made to the emergence of feminism in mid-19th-century Britain.

Anti-slavery campaigning by white, mainly middle-class, women in Britain came in three main waves. The first was directed at the abolition of the British slave trade and took place between 1783 and 1815. The second was directed at the emancipation of slaves in the British colonies in the West Indies and took place between 1823 and 1838. This overlapped with a third and final wave between 1834 and 1868 which aimed at universal abolition, and which was increasingly directed against slavery in the United States of America.

The resistance to their involvement that women often encountered from the male leadership of the British anti-slavery movement prompted them to press ahead in increasingly independent ways. As a result, they began to develop skills, connections, and self-confidence which could readily be transferred to other campaigns. The abolitionist petitioning which they organized in the early 1830s, for example, was their first large-scale intervention in parliamentary politics. On this basis they began to break out of what had traditionally been seen as the 'separate sphere' of wives and mothers and to assert themselves as equal citizens. This began to be formally articulated in the early 1840s and to have organizational consequences in the 1850s with the setting up of increasing numbers of separate local women's anti-slavery societies as well as a greater role for women within the predominantly male ones. Then, when the third wave of campaigning was at its peak, women's anti-slavery activism spilled over more or less directly into two other important campaigns. One was that against the Contagious

Diseases Acts between 1869 and 1886, sometimes referred to as the ‘new abolitionist movement’: for this legislation permitted the forcible medical examination of prostitutes and their confinement in hospital. The other campaign grew into the first significant mobilization for the extension of the vote to women and took place between 1865 and 1867. In these ways, the anti-slavery experience became a major catalyst for the emergence of the feminist movement in modern Britain (Midgley, 1992).

Something very similar was going on across the Atlantic in the United States where, if anything, the movement for women’s emancipation had even stronger roots in campaigns against slavery. Thus, for example, a pioneering British essay on the enfranchisement of women published by John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor in the *Westminster Review* as early as 1851 was initially a report on a National Women’s Rights Convention held in Worcester, Massachusetts in October 1850. Attended by 900 people, this was a spin-off from earlier anti-slavery conventions and all the main speakers, male and female, were leading American abolitionists, including the two prime movers, Pauline Wright Davis and Lucy Stone. Echoing the arguments made at the convention, Mill and Taylor began their essay with the US constitution’s statement that it was self-evident that “all men are created equal”, insisting that that “men” be interpreted as “human beings”, and going on to congratulate those who had developed a campaign for women’s rights out of the campaign against slavery:

It was fitting that the men whose names will be associated with the extirpation, from the democratic soil of America, of the aristocracy of colour, should be among the originators, for America and for the rest of the world, of the first collective protest against the aristocracy of sex; a distinction as accidental as that of colour, and fully as irrelevant to all questions of government (Mill & Taylor, 1851, p. 149).

Making this transfer of political ideas and campaigning methods from supporting the emancipation of black slaves to insisting on that of white women was far from an arbitrary move. In the first place, female anti-slavery activists had focused heavily on the oppression of black women by chattel slavery, so there was already a strong proto-feminist element in their thinking. They highlighted the sexual exploitation of female slaves and their

lack of rights over their own bodies; they argued that black women had the same feelings for their children as white women; and they began to use a distinctive rhetoric of sisterhood, above all in the key slogan “Am I not a woman and a sister”, deliberately without a question mark to underline the answer “yes” (Midgley, 2007). Moreover, in the third quarter of the 19th century women in Britain had their independent legal identity suspended on marriage, which probably affected the women of the middle classes more than those of the upper and lower classes, because upper-class parents had sufficient resources to protect their daughters’ property by setting up trusts and lower-class women were more likely to go out to work. Not only did all a woman’s property pass to her husband on marriage; she had no legal rights to the custody or guardianship of their children; and she had no recourse to legal protection against physical cruelty, sexual abuse or negligence by her husband (Griffin, 2012). Thus, until the law began to change in the 1870s, it seemed not unreasonable to compare the position of married women with that of slaves. As Barbara Bodichon put it in her influential digest of women’s legal position in mid-19th-century Britain, published in 1854:

[...] it is time that legal protection be thrown over the produce of their labour and that in entering the state of marriage, they no longer pass from freedom into the condition of the slave, all whose earnings belong to his master and not to himself (quoted in Ware, 2015, p. 102).

Perhaps this frequent and apparently natural pairing of slaves and women in the minds of those campaigning for their emancipation was partly a result of the way they had for long appeared alongside each other in one of the Biblical sources frequently used by those defending their subordination: the Epistles of Paul the Apostle. For, Paul’s letters to the early Christian communities throughout the Roman world had not only emphasized that wives should submit to their husbands and slaves should obey their masters but had consequently placed women and slaves in a category along with children. For example, in *Colossians* Chapter 3, verses 18, 20 and 22, he had written:

Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord [...] Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord

[...] Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it [...] with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord (Paul the Apostle, 62 CE).

Then, of course, the meaning of such passages would become a major issue of debate as Biblical interpretation became increasingly historical in the second half of the 19th century.

Emily Davies (1830-1921) was not particularly concerned about women's property rights but focused rather on their access to education as a necessary preliminary for their participation in social and political life, with a special focus

on higher education. She campaigned to get women admitted to University of London degrees; wrote a book on *The Higher Education of Women* (1866) which became the seminal work in its field; and eventually set up her own 'College for Women' in 1869, which before long grew into Girton College, Cambridge. This huge step gave women access to the same curricula and examinations as men in one of the world's oldest and most prestigious universities. Davies did almost as much, through a series of carefully worked-out steps, to promote reforms in the provision of girls' secondary education which was, of course, a necessary preparation for their higher education.

Moreover, in contrast to most of the anti-slavery activists, her case for the extension of women's educational access was not founded on arguments about individual rights or even the assertion of equality, but rather followed John Stuart Mill in arguing on grounds of utilitarianism and pragmatism. Thus, Davies insisted that society as a whole would benefit if individuals were given the greatest possible opportunity to make a contribution: this would in turn be a function of their abilities, which could only be discovered experimentally by giving them a chance to develop them. Women might, indeed, be weaker and less capable than men, but that could only be found out if they were given

Illustration 1: Emily Davies in 1880



the same opportunities to show what they could do. Only after that would it be appropriate to ask whether it would be sensible to give them the vote, ability to hold public office or control over business matters (Hendry, 2021).

In these ways, Emily Davies had an unusual standing in the women's movement as a socially conservative and intellectually measured strategist who focused on one particular, and rather technical, issue regarding women's position in British society. However, in the view of her most recent biographer, John Hendry, her work in the field of education had the greatest short-term and long-term results of all the efforts to promote female emancipation at the time:

[...] Emily's stubborn insistence on ladylike decorum and propriety, rational Millian principles and working in the ways she thought most appropriate would set her at odds with numerous colleagues, both men and women, who might otherwise have supported and worked with her. But they would also produce results (Hendry, 2021, p. 191).

Emily Davies, then, might not seem the most obvious candidate among Britain's early feminists for an exploration of anti-slavery connections more associated with political Radicals, but on closer examination she too was working in an environment deeply marked by that experience across two significant generations.

2. The Earlier Generation of Abolitionists

At the core of the first-wave campaign to abolish the slave trade was a group known as the 'Clapham Sect' led politically by William Wilberforce, independent MP for Yorkshire. They were mainly evangelical Anglicans but, being also liberals, had connections with large numbers of dissenters, especially Unitarians. Emily Davies's father, John, was an Anglican vicar from exactly this religious and intellectual milieu but there is no evidence that he was directly connected with the Clapham Sect or active in the anti-slavery movement. However, two of Davies's closest supporters in the campaign that led to the foundation of Girton College, Barbara Bodichon and Anna Richardson, came from families that were.

Barbara Bodichon (1827-1891) and Emily Davies met for the first time in late 1858 when they were 31 and 28 respectively: but though Bodichon was only older by three years, she was a whole lifetime older in experience. Moreover, the two women's personalities could not have been more contrasting: Bodichon

Illustration 2: Barbara Bodichon in 1861



was outgoing, exuberant and rebellious, while Davies was reserved, precise and conventional. As a result, while they became very effective colleagues, their friendship did not develop into intimacy. Bodichon had a large enough private income to pursue her own interests as well as giving generously to causes she supported. One of her main interests was painting, both self-taught and formally trained, and she gradually became a recognized figure in the tradition of English water-color landscapes. She was also an important early feminist leader: she had published a brief and widely read codification of the legal position of women in 1854; two years later she had launched a petition and parliamentary campaign about married women's property rights; and at the time she and Davies met she was the major shareholder in the *English Woman's Journal* set up in 1858. Bodichon was not always enthusiastic about the quality of the content of this publication but it undoubtedly had a pioneering impact. For, its offices included a reading room and a luncheon room which made it into a sort of London club for women, and it soon became the focal point of a group of young activists known as the 'Langham Place set'. Their numerous projects including a Society for Promoting the Employment of Women and a model printing business at the Victoria Press, employing and training only women.

Meanwhile, when Barbara Leigh Smith, as she then was, was travelling in Algiers in 1856 she had met and soon after married a French republican and

medical philanthropist, Eugene Bodichon. From then onwards she moved backwards and forwards between the two countries, spending most of her winters in North Africa (Hirsch, 1998; Hendry, 2021).

Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon had been born into a wealthy Unitarian family which derived its considerable fortune from several generations of traders on both sides and had very strong anti-slavery connections. Her grandfather, William Smith, was brought up in Clapham, became associated with the Clapham Sect and, as Radical MP for Norwich, worked very closely in parliament with William Wilberforce on the abolition of the slave trade from 1790 onwards, and then with Zachary Macauley on the abolition of slavery in the British colonies. Moreover, as sugar imports made up a large part of his business, he made a point of boycotting sugar produced by slave labor. Bodichon's father, Benjamin (Ben), took over as Radical MP for Norwich and worked closely on the innovative education of the working classes with Henry Brougham, who went on to play a key role in the passing of the 1833 Slavery Abolition Act. Over twenty years later, Brougham also played a key role in following up Barbara Bodichon's petition for the reform of married women's property rights by moving a bill in the House of Lords in 1857. And, in his speech, he made a direct comparison between the two campaigns. For, he argued that pushing for changes in the position of married women might look hopeless, but then so had pushing for changes in the position of chattel slaves at the outset, and success for that campaign had only come as a result of persistent pressure and two major pieces of legislation separated by many years:

[...] for many long years, the cause of abolition was, by all but the most sanguine of philanthropists, regarded as hopeless [...] then came the Government of my Noble Friend opposite, and his colleagues [...] and the traffic was by Act of Parliament declared unlawful, and forbidden [...] But no measure could as yet be attempted for the extinction of slavery, even by those most hostile to the traffic [...] [until] heaven be praised, by acts both of the Imperial and Colonial Legislatures, slavery soon ceased to pollute the soil of the British dominions – a consummation deemed impossible for full twenty years after the first abolition [...] Such, my Lords, are the grounds on which I venture to build my sanguine hopes, let me say my confident expectation, that measures for the amendment of our Laws like those for which I now crave your favorable attention, may ere long be sanctioned

by your approval and that of the other branches of the Legislature, in accordance with the decided opinions and loudly expressed feelings of the community at large (Brougham, 1857, pp. 17-18, 21-22).

As a result of this long family tradition, the Bodichon household was frequently visited by leading anti-slavery activists. Her father Ben was a regular host to such guests as the American feminist abolitionists Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Meanwhile, her beloved aunt Julia (Ju) was directly involved in the second-wave campaign to abolish slavery in the West Indies and introduced other activists into the family circle, including her closest friend Elizabeth Reid, whose own house was a significant center of the female petitioning of the third wave of the anti-slavery movement and who went on to found Bedford College, London in 1849. Reid, indeed, made a comparison between her hopes that the new college would open up opportunities for women and the arrangements made in America to help slaves escape up through New England and over the Canadian border to freedom through what was known as the 'Underground Railway'. Other visitors at the Bodichons' included Harriet Martineau, a feminist intellectual who was a huge transatlantic anti-slavery presence, and Lady Byron, a talented mathematician and major financial benefactor of the abolitionist movement. Bodichon also had an honorary aunt in Mary Howitt who was heavily involved in anti-slavery petitioning and then later in raising money to pay the ransom of the fugitive slave and abolitionist campaigner Frederick Douglass in 1846: indeed, it was Bodichon who sent her father's £2 donation towards this fund across to Howitt (Hirsch, 1998). From her earliest years, then, Barbara Bodichon had witnessed independent women's political activism at very close quarters, with the anti-slavery campaign as its central element and key reference point.

Anna Richardson (1832-1872) and Emily Davies met for the first time around 1860 when they were 28 and 30 respectively: but though Richardson was two years younger she was very well-read and widely travelled and became a sort of teacher to Davies. Once again, as in the case of Davies's relationship with Bodichon, there was a marked contrast in personalities and something of an attraction of opposites. For, Richardson was deeply emotional, spiritual, and poetic while Davies was very practical and matter of fact. However, Richardson encouraged Davies to read more widely, taught

Illustration 3: Anna Richardson



her some Latin and Greek and took her along to lectures on physiology organized for young ladies by a local doctor. They formed a close friendship and had an intimate correspondence for some years until Richardson's untimely death in 1872. What initially brought them together was a common interest in setting up a regional branch of the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women in Newcastle, where Davies's family had been based since her father's appointment as Rector of Gateshead in 1839.

As was so often going to be the case from then on, Davies became the secretary of the committee; she then recruited Richardson on to it, having seen her name and local address among the subscribers to the *English Woman's Journal*. As their relationship developed Richardson, still in the North, was a consistent confidante and solid support for Davies, by then in London, across her growing range of work for women's causes, particularly the establishment of the College for Women. Richardson's main contribution was setting up a support committee in Newcastle for this new institution, though Davies would have liked her to have been more involved in what was soon to become Girton College, and even taken on a teaching role (O'Donnell, 2002; Hendry, 2021).

The important point for our current purposes is that through her father Edward, a Newcastle Quaker and leather manufacturer, Richardson was closely connected to the main circle of anti-slavery activists in the North East of England. Her father's first cousin Henry Richardson (1806-1885) a grocer and tea trader in Newcastle, Henry's wife Anna Richardson (née Atkins, 1806-1892) and Henry's sister Ellen Richardson (1806-1863) were also all Quakers: indeed, the Richardsons were the dominant dynasty among the Quakers in the region. The older Anna Richardson played a major role in the anti-slavery movement by setting up the Newcastle Ladies' Free Produce Association in

1846 which then spawned a network of twenty-six Free Labour Associations across the country in 1850-51: all, unfortunately, rather futile attempts to boycott slave-grown cotton imports from the United States. Meanwhile, her sister-in-law Ellen Richardson was rather more successful through raising funds for the ransom of two leading African American abolitionists, Frederick Douglass (in 1846) and William Wells Brown (in 1854), which enabled them to return to the United States to campaign without fear of re-enslavement (Mood, 2005).

Surrounded by such intense anti-slavery commitments across her extended family, it is not surprising that, in her correspondence with Davies around the time of the founding of Girton College, Anna Richardson should have found it quite natural to present the position of women and slaves as close parallels:

For the point in each case is the degree of obedience and bondage - not the relation of superior and inferior in itself which will exist as long as human nature does; and, as I think Christ intended to raise the slave into the servant and friend, so surely, the poor down-trodden wife, of all countries and times, into a common woman, who should be like Wordsworth's perfect one (quoted in "Memoir of Anna Deborah Richardson", 1877, p. 217).

William Wordsworth's poem 'Perfect Woman' had been written in 1804 as a tribute to his wife, Mary Hutchinson. And it is worth noting that, while the first two stanzas do repeat a rather clichéd image of female perfection in terms of first impressions of beauty and softness, the poet's closer acquaintance with his wife in the third stanza discovers living qualities which would have had more appeal for Richardson and Davies:

A being breathing thoughtful breath,
A traveller between life and death;
The reason firm, the temperate will,
Endurance, foresight, strength, and skill;
A perfect Woman, nobly plann'd,
To warn, to comfort, and command;
(Wordsworth, 1804)

Moreover, Wordsworth would have been regarded by them as, if not an enthusiastic abolitionist after his renunciation of his youthful revolutionary enthusiasm, at least sound on his opposition to slavery. Indeed, the conservative Anglicanism and gradualism of his mature years might have had a particular appeal for Emily Davies.

3. The Impact of the American Civil War

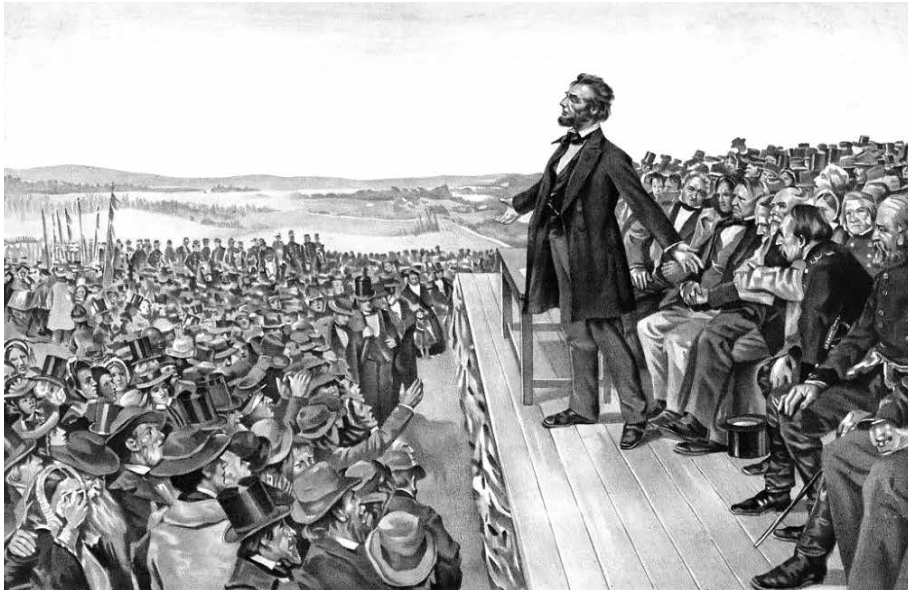
By the late 1850s the very successes of the abolitionist movement in eliminating the activities for which Britain was directly responsible had made it seem less necessary. Moreover, the moral passion for individual freedom which had fueled the earlier generation of evangelicals was being replaced by an intellectual concern for 'social science' in one form or another: with Christian Socialism, Positivism and Darwinian evolution shaping a new outlook focusing on legislative intervention to make measurable improvements in collective social conditions, alongside the emergence of increasingly humanistic and historically informed discussions of religious matters. However, the abolitionist momentum was revitalized by the outbreak of the American Civil War in 1860. For, though nominally focused on the secession of the Confederate states in the South, it became clear that the substantive issue was their desire to maintain slavery, which had already been abolished in the North and which the federal government had the ambition of abolishing throughout the Union.

Eugenio Biagini's (1992) extensive research in the 19th-century newspaper press has already highlighted the importance of this conflict for British popular liberalism more generally. At first, some activists of an older generation of men involved in Chartism supported the ambitions of the Southern states for independence. In some contrast, many of those of a younger generation born around 1830, the male equivalents of Bodichon and Richardson, had already been more deeply shaped by abolitionism. However, as the Civil War continued and the issues became clearer, there was a significant fusion of these two groups into a new leadership of popular liberalism, enthusiastic for the Northern cause and the democratic vision contained in the speeches of Abraham Lincoln. Mass meetings took place across the industrial districts and the dramatic assassination of the American president in 1865 was greeted there

with shock and dismay. Then, the granting of the vote to liberated black slaves by the Reconstruction governments in the following years was seen as a spur to further activism at home:

Our interest in American politics has been mainly that of a desire to see the disenthralment of an oppressed and cruelly-wronged race. The victory for humanity we at length witness. What a revolution in six years! Will the British working men occupy as proud a political position as that held by the negroes of the States, within six years to come? There is stinging humiliation for us as Englishmen in the very question (G. J. Harney in 1867, quoted in Biagini, 1992, p. 81).

Illustration 4: Abraham Lincoln at Gettysburg, 19 November 1863



For John Stuart Mill in particular, the American Civil War was a major catalyst in reviving optimism about the United States. Of course, Mill had long approved of the principles of liberty and equality on which the nation had been founded but, partly under the influence of Alexis de Tocqueville's critical account of *Democracy in America* (1835 and 1840), had begun to fear that it would decline into an increasingly mindless worship of its own

republican superiority and a neglect of the need to put the grand principles of the constitution fully into practice. So, he welcomed the salutary shock of a lengthy conflict, the eventual victory of the North and the elimination of chattel slavery as the beginnings of a regeneration of the American people which would lead them to address the other major issue of continuing inequality: the subordinate position of women (Compton, 2008). Thus, in a letter to the feminist abolitionist Elizabeth Cady Stanton in 1869, Mill was still absorbing and reflecting on the impact of the Civil War: “[The nation’s] late glorious struggle has shaken old prejudices and brought men to the feeling that the principles of your democratic institutions are not mere phrases, but are meant to be believed and acted upon toward all persons” (quoted in Compton, 2008, p. 242).

As we have seen above, the parents and grandparents of a new generation of mid-19th-century British women activists had been committed to abolition, and the younger women had, at least implicitly, seen their own fight to free their sisters from oppression as a continuation of their elders’ fight to free slaves from bondage. Now they found this initially inherited theme brought once again to the forefront of their political awareness. Even before the secession of the Confederate states from the Union, awareness of the parallel oppression of black slaves and white women was growing among Britain’s women activists. Barbara Bodichon, for example, was most outspoken on the issue in conversations she had with Southerners during a seven-month tour of the United States, a sort of honeymoon, with her new husband in 1857-58. She concluded that the Southerners’ minds had been perverted by their belief in false ideas about both slaves and women. On the one hand, she was genuinely impressed by the absence of hierarchy and the practice of real democracy among the white male population in America, on the other she was appalled by their close coexistence with the subordination of huge numbers of their fellow human beings:

Slavery is a greater injustice, but it is allied to the injustice to women so closely that I cannot see one without thinking of the other and feeling how soon slavery would be destroyed if right opinions were entertained on the other question (quoted in Hirsch, 1998, p. 151).

Subsequently, on her return to Britain, Bodichon published a series of

four articles on American slavery in the *English Woman's Journal* in the late 1850s and early 1860s. And in the last of these she made a direct comparison of the way in which both slaves and women were deprived of access to education, seeing that as a system of social and political control in both cases (Bodichon, 1863).

The initial stimulus for the revival of active abolitionist campaigning by women in Britain came from an open letter written in 1863 by Harriet Beecher Stowe, a leading American anti-slavery campaigner and author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), calling for the women of England to support the North in the Civil War as a Christian fight for "the inalienable rights of immortal souls" and expressing some regret that there had been a "decline of the noble anti-slavery fire in England" (Stowe, 1863). A rejoinder by Frances Power Cobbe, a feminist philosopher and later prominent anti-vivisectionist, concluded by expressing passionate reassurance that this was not so:

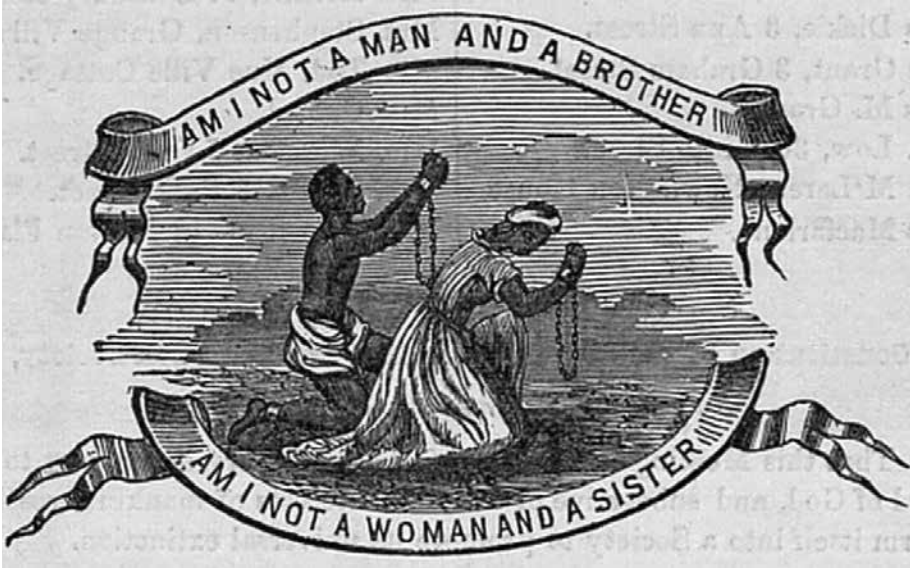
Our hearts are with you in unchanged sympathy for your holy cause, in undying abhorrence of Slavery, in profound sorrow for your present afflictions, and in firmest faith in the final overthrow of that unrighteous Power whose cornerstone is an injustice and a crime (Cobbe, 1863).

Along the way Cobbe also made it clear that she saw the oppression of slaves and women as direct equivalents;

[...] the right to freedom is founded simply and solely on the moral nature wherewith God has endowed every man and woman of the human race, enabling them, by its use, to attain to that virtue which is the end of their creation (Cobbe, 1863).

The main practical outcome of this exchange was the establishment of the Ladies' London Emancipation Society in August 1863 by Clementia ('Mentia') Taylor (1810-1908) at her home, Aubrey House, in the Holland Park district of west London. This is generally considered the first national anti-slavery society for women anywhere in the world, though there had been provincial ones before, both in Britain and in North America. The reason for a separate society for women was apparently that Taylor had applied for membership to the London Anti-Slavery Society but had been turned down on the grounds of her gender

Illustration 5: An image used in pamphlets of the Ladies' London Emancipation Society in the 1860s



even though her husband Peter was its treasurer. Her separate and independent society soon had over 200 women members including Emily Davies herself, who not only joined it but also became a member of its Executive Committee alongside her close friend Charlotte Manning (1803-71). The main activity of the Ladies' London Emancipation Society was to disseminate anti-slavery material to advance the understanding of the Northern case in the American Civil War as being about the immorality of slavery rather than simply an attempt to prevent the political independence of the Southern states. It distributed twelve tracts in 1863-64 with an estimated circulation of over 12,000 copies, mostly published by Emily Faithfull (1835-95) at the Victoria Press in London, who was also well-known to Emily Davies through their joint involvement with the *English Woman's Journal* and the *Victoria Magazine* in the immediately preceding years (Midgley, 1992).

In the following years this network of women activists which had formed initially around anti-slavery issues, began to turn its attention to other campaigns. Thus, early in 1865 Emily Davies played a leading role along with Charlotte Manning in setting up the 'Kensington Society', so named because it met in Manning's house in that part of west London. It had

about 50 members and met quarterly for discussion meetings for about three years, becoming increasingly focused on the issue of women's parliamentary suffrage, partly because the group also drew in a significantly more Radical current under the leadership of Mentia Taylor. Davies was initially uneasy about this, fearing that such an advanced demand would provoke a backlash and upset her own more careful, almost technical, step-by-step work in the education field. However, because Barbara Bodichon was very enthusiastic about the suffrage question and led the way in submitting another petition to parliament, Davies allowed herself to get heavily involved in her support. Indeed, as Bodichon was increasingly unwell and frequently abroad, it was Davies who became the key, if characteristically low-profile, organizer of this first extra-parliamentary campaign for the vote for women; with John Stuart Mill playing a parallel role in parliament by promoting an unsuccessful amendment to extend the householder franchise across the gender divide by replacing the word 'men' with 'person' in the 1867 Reform Bill (Hirsch, 1998; Hendry, 2021).

Illustration 6: *Punch* magazine's satirical view of Mill's amendment to the 1867 Reform Bill



As the pinnacle of their efforts of the 1860s Emily Davies and Barbara Bodichon proved to be a truly remarkable partnership in their successful establishment of a residential college of higher education for women: Davies providing the administrative persistence and intellectual ambition, Bodichon most of the initial money and a winning personal charisma. Davies's long march through the institutions had begun in the summer of 1862 with a careful campaign to open up the Cambridge school-level examinations to girls on the same terms as boys. When this was achieved by February 1865, she set her sights on the long-held dream of a university college: in October 1869 the first students took up residence in rented accommodation at Hitchin, where Charlotte Manning served briefly as the first Mistress, and the college moved to its own premises at Girton for the academic year 1873-4 (Hirsch, 1998; Hendry, 2021).

Illustration 7: Girton College in 1873



It is still there today, considerably larger and looking so much like a venerable Victorian establishment in its own now picturesque grounds that it is not immediately obvious what a visionary and courageous effort it

took to get it going in the 1860s, before women could even take part in the professions let alone cast their votes in parliamentary elections. If the college's foundation is to be understood in terms broader than the power of individual personalities, at least in its timing it can be seen as the crest of a wave of progressive ambition and assertiveness sparked off by enthusiastic support for the Northern cause in the American Civil War.

4. Conclusions

Clare Midgley concluded her study of *Women Against Slavery* with the claim that:

Anti-slavery was more than one of a number of philanthropic causes which encouraged women to become public activists and led them to develop a consciousness of the limitations imposed by dominant ideas about their proper social roles. It was a political movement central to the development of an extra-Parliamentary but public female political culture (Midgley, 1992, p. 176).

Investigating the network of women around the founder of Girton College, Emily Davies, supports this view. Many of them were brought up in families with strong traditions of abolitionist activism; most of them saw the campaigns for the emancipation of slaves and the emancipation of women as directly parallel social movements; and their efforts were brought together by a dynamic upsurge in the 1860s sparked off by the Civil War over slavery in the United States. Of course, their main motivation was their own experience of restricted opportunities as middle-class women in Britain but, as Midgley points out, the international anti-slavery movement was not just one other issue among many but arguably the central issue which stimulated and shaped the way they went on to participate in public life more generally.

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Professional Profile

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