

Women

Alastair Reid examines how British women anti-slavery campaigners reacted to the American Civil War.

The American Civil War and th

AT A TIME when the upsurge of interest around Black Lives Matter has drawn attention to the widespread and important benefits that British society derived from enslavement and the trades associated with it, it is also worth remembering the importance of anti-slavery ideas and actions for liberal and radical politics throughout the early-nineteenth century. This was nowhere more significant than in the early campaigns to improve the position of women, which emerged from the same Unitarian and Quaker circles that did so much to produce the movement to abolish slavery.

One of the leading figures in taking these proto-feminist campaigns onto the national political stage in the 1860s was Emily Davies (1830–1921), famous as the main organiser of the first residential ‘College for Women’ in 1869, which became Girton College, Cambridge; perhaps less often remembered as the main organiser of the first campaign for women’s suffrage in 1866–67. Davies was admittedly an Anglican and a Conservative, but she was the exception among her close colleagues: Barbara Bodichon (née Leigh Smith) (1827–1891) was more typical, as a Unitarian whose father and grandfather were both abolitionists as well as Radical MPs for Norwich, and one of whose aunts played a key role in the organisation of women’s petitions against slavery in the 1830s. So, Bodichon and many of the other members of the circle around Davies had seen female political activism close at hand as they were growing up, with abolitionist activity as one of its central elements. It might be thought that the very successes of the abolitionists in eliminating the British slave trade in 1807 and slave ownership in the British colonies in 1833 would have made the movement less necessary and also less influential. However, the moral crusade against enslavement was suddenly revitalised by enthusiasm for the Northern side in the

American Civil War which broke out in 1861 and which drew in even such previously uninvolved women as Emily Davies. It is therefore worth exploring this wider national and indeed international context to throw light on what we can see as some of the main ‘external’ influences on the emergence of the early women’s movement in Britain, which has usually been studied from a more ‘internal’ perspective. To make this manageable in the space available, this paper will focus on the circle of women around Emily Davies, based mainly in London.

The Civil War in America and its impact on British politics

In an initial attempt to contain the dispute, the Northern case for maintaining the Union was conciliatory about the abolition of slavery and focused instead on arguments about majority rule in a democracy; but this led to considerable confusion among overseas observers, as the Southern secessionists countered it by emphasising their ambition for self-determination. There were, however, many who understood from the start that the whole point of this self-determination was the preservation of slavery, and who saw the dispute as the latest episode in a long struggle between aspirations for liberty and popular government on the one hand and the resistance of hereditary privilege on the other, which had begun with the American and French Revolutions. From this point of view, the conflict was not an internal dispute over sovereignty but a key test of the ‘republican experiment’ with implications for the rest of the Atlantic world, throughout which reactionary forces had been dominant since defeat of the revolutions of 1848.¹

Once the Northern leaders had a better grasp of the extent of the unpopularity of slavery overseas, they began to shift their case towards a more explicit championing of liberty and

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equality against slavery and aristocracy, which seems to have been just in time to prevent intervention by the British and French governments in support of Southern independence. The turning point was Giuseppe Garibaldi's maverick march on Rome in the summer of 1862, with the aim of making it the capital of a fully united Italy. This turned out to be something of a farce, but the popular demonstrations in support of the wounded Garibaldi which subsequently swept from Italy across the continent, combined with his very prominent statements of support for the North in the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, made European governments think again about intervening on the side of notorious American enslavers.² This new international situation favouring the North was then crystallised by two further public events during 1863. First, President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation became law at the beginning of January and unambiguously focused the war on the question of slavery. And second, Lincoln's short but powerful Gettysburg Address universalised the conflict in November 1863, by declaring the Union's aims to be not only 'that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom' but also 'that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth'. Whether consciously or not, this echoed some well-known phrases of the Italian republican nationalist Giuseppe Mazzini, and it turned Lincoln into one of the major icons of liberal and democratic aspiration throughout Europe for many decades after his shocking assassination in 1865, just as the North was securing victory.³

The four-year-long American Civil War therefore had a powerful transatlantic resonance and transmitted a major impetus to progressive movements in Britain. For, the fight to end Southern slavery led to a revival of abolitionist feeling which enabled the construction

of new political alliances: between parliamentary Liberals and Radicals, and between both those groups and extra-parliamentary popular radicalism, including a resurgent trade union movement.⁴ Indeed, a stronger unity was also created within extra-parliamentary radicalism itself.⁵ As a result, over the next five years this broad progressive movement was able to achieve not only a major expansion of the British electorate in 1867 but also a triumphant success for popular Liberalism with the election of William Gladstone's first reforming government in 1868.

Once again, a key link in the chain of events was provided by Garibaldi, whose long career as a leader of military adventures in pursuit of national independence in Europe and South America led him to be seen not only as the 'Hero of the Two Worlds' but also, with reference to a more ancient form of enslavement, as a modern Moses. His visit to Britain in 1864 was initially intended as a rather low-key propaganda exercise in support of liberal Italy, but unexpectedly caught the mood of the moment and turned into an extraordinary expression of spontaneous public passion for a man who had become a sort of secular saint, renowned for his moral virtue and physical charm. When Garibaldi arrived in London, the crowds which came to see him were estimated at 500,000 and, since so many people wanted to speak to him and shake his hand, it took him five hours to travel the three miles from the railway station to the place where he was going to stay.⁶ But Garibaldi's tour of Britain was suddenly cut short, allegedly because of pressure from the government not to visit Manchester, Newcastle and Glasgow as originally planned, in case it stirred up too much popular agitation. If there was any truth in that, the cancellation had rather the opposite effect, with the ensuing deep disappointment leading directly to the formation of the

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National Reform League the following year: a body which would play the leading role in mounting pressure for electoral reform from outside parliament, with Garibaldi in a prominent role as its honorary president.⁷

That year, 1865, also saw the election to the House of Commons of a number of Radicals who supported the North in the American Civil War, most notably John Stuart Mill and Henry Fawcett. Then, after just two more years of intensive extra-parliamentary pressure, a Conservative prime minister, Benjamin Disraeli, conceded the first measure of electoral reform in a generation in a bid to calm down the agitation at a time of unsettling disputes over British rule in Jamaica and Ireland as well as in domestic industrial relations.⁸ While still falling short of manhood suffrage, the Second Reform Act of 1867 extended the vote to all male householders, almost doubling the electorate and including many ordinary manual workers within the political system for the first time. Throughout the campaign for electoral reform, comparisons with the United States were prominent among both progressives and conservatives. The conservative side usually had the upper hand in parliament by pointing to many examples of mediocrity and corruption under America's more democratic political arrangements. But the progressives were able to ride an ongoing wave of enthusiasm in the country, fuelled by passionate agitation appealing to anti-aristocratic and anti-slavery attitudes.⁹

For the leading Radical intellectual John Stuart Mill, the American Civil War was a major catalyst not only in reviving his optimism about the United States but also in encouraging him to extend the discussion of parliamentary reform to include votes for women. Of course, Mill had long approved of the principles of liberty and equality on which the United States 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, Mill welcomed what he saw as the salutary shock of a lengthy conflict, followed by 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.¹⁰ In a letter to the feminist

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abolitionist Elizabeth Cady Stanton in 1869, he 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.'¹¹ Then, when Mill finally published his classic work on *The Subjection of Women* that year, though it had mostly been written as early as 1861, he called for the reform of property laws affecting women and equal access to the vote. And one of the central themes of his argument was a comparison of the position of married women with that of enslaved people, considering the latter to be in some respects better off as they usually had some time away from their duties to their masters. In any case, slavery having just been abolished in the Southern states, the position of women was the one remaining major anomaly in the liberal democracies which needed to be addressed:

The law of servitude in marriage is a monstrous contradiction to all the principles of the modern world, and to all the experience through which those principles have been slowly and painfully worked out. It is the whole case, now that negro slavery has been abolished, in which a human being in the plenitude of every faculty is delivered up to the tender mercies of another human being, in the hope forsooth that this other will use the power solely for the good of the person subjected to it. Marriage is the only actual bondage known to our law. There remain no legal slaves, except the mistress of every house.¹²

Anti-slavery and the emergence of the women's movement in Britain

In these ways, the victory of the North in the American Civil War, followed immediately by the emancipation of the enslaved people in the Southern states and, soon after that, by their inclusion within the political system, gave a huge boost to the ambition and assertiveness of campaigners for democracy and women's rights on the European side of the Atlantic. As the American situation unfolded, the new generation in Britain born around 1830 found that what had initially been largely a tradition of abolitionism inherited from their older female relatives was coming to life again as a major issue of their own day. Barbara Bodichon, for example, went on a seven-month tour

of the United States with her husband in 1857–58 as a sort of honeymoon, and they spent two months of the winter in New Orleans, where every conversation seemed to be about race and slavery. Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) was mentioned by Southerners from the start of their visit and roundly condemned as the product of an appalling mindset which combined anti-slavery and women's rights. Bodichon agreed about that combination but gave it the opposite evaluation. Thus, she frequently compared the position of enslaved people and women, speculating that the belief that women should be subordinated to men was a foundation of the belief that Blacks should be subordinated to Whites:

[A free mulatto] told me there was no career for free negroes, no rights, no public position. All he said might have been said by any woman anywhere.

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 upon the other question.¹³

On her return to Britain, Bodichon began providing readers of the *English Woman's Journal* with material on the realities of slavery and she was encouraged by Emily Davies, who was the *Journal's* editor at the time and who, once the Civil War had broken out, had no hesitation in publishing pieces critical of the South: 'If we exist for anything, surely it is to fight against slavery, of Negro as well as other, women'.¹⁴ However, the issue did not become fully focused until two years into the conflict when President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation became law in January 1863. Bodichon was quick to propose a new campaign: in the February 1863 edition of the *Journal* she published a long and lucid piece underlining the centrality of slavery to the dispute between North and South. Indeed, she seemed to be hoping to shock her readers into active support of the North by providing evidence that the South was aiming not only to maintain its existing plantations but also to populate the new territories in the American West by reopening the Atlantic slave trade.¹⁵ Meanwhile, there had already been an initial stimulus for the revival of active abolitionist campaigning by women in Britain from an open letter published in the January 1863 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* by Harriet Beecher Stowe, calling for the women

Women
campaigners:
Emily Davies, 1880
(1830–1921)
Barbara Bodichon,
1861 (1827–91)
Clementia Taylor,
1898 (1810–1908)



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of Britain 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'.¹⁶ A rejoinder of passionate support by Frances Power Cobbe (1822–1904) was produced as a pamphlet in London and then picked up and reproduced in a later edition of the *Atlantic Monthly*. In the course of her argument, Cobbe made it clear that she, like Bodichon, saw the disempowerment of enslaved Blacks and female Whites 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.¹⁷

The main practical outcome of these interventions was the establishment of the Ladies' London Emancipation Society on 20 March 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. It soon had over 200 members and, while its executive committee included some prominent veterans such as Harriet Martineau, it was notable for drawing in a significant number of women who had not previously been involved in abolitionist activity, usually because they were from a younger generation. Thus, the executive committee also included Emily Davies alongside her close friend from the older generation Charlotte Manning (1803–71). Like its male equivalent, the main activity of the Ladies' Society was to disseminate detailed information about the realities of Southern slavery to support the new case of the North about its war aims: that they were about ending the immorality of slavery rather than just trying to interfere with states' rights. The society distributed a large range of tracts and published twelve of its own in 1863–64 with an estimated circulation of over 12,000 copies. The society's first annual report made a point of ending its detailed account of its own publications by quoting from its fifth tract, a reprint of a pamphlet by the Boston abolitionist Loring Moody, indicating how at least some of its leading members saw the significance of the American Civil War:

The design of this work is to show, from the testimony of the prime movers and leaders in this Rebellion, and those in sympathy with them, that this is an open and undisguised conflict between the opposing principles of Freedom and Despotism; that the leaders of the Rebellion are fighting to break down and destroy the government of Freedom, which our fathers founded, and to establish a despotic, slaveholding aristocracy on its ruins.¹⁸

Given this wider political perspective, it is interesting to note that the one male subscriber to the Ladies' London Emancipation Society listed was 'Signor Mazzini', a close friend of Mentia Taylor's and frequent visitor to her home in Holland Park; and it seems that 'General Garibaldi' was recruited as an honorary member.¹⁹ Certainly, a delegation from the Ladies' Society presented the latter with an address a year later during his tumultuous reception in London in April 1864. And, when Emily Davies wrote an amusing letter about her part in that meeting to her friend Anna Richardson (1832–1872), even she was clearly excited and not completely immune to Garibaldi's famous charisma:

I have been engaged in fine sports to-day, helping to present an address to Garry Baldy, as the Londoners call him. It was as being on the Committee of the Ladies' Emancipation Society that I had the honour & happiness of going. I felt rather unworthy of it. The face is very fine in its calm composure, not at all foreign in the common sense of the word. We were a disreputable set of people (except myself & one other lady.) & our address was a most inflammatory production. I felt as if I had got among conspirators, & was relieved when I discovered two clergymen in the company.²⁰

In the following years this network of women activists which had begun to form around anti-slavery issues then began to turn its attention to other campaigns. In May 1865 Emily Davies and Charlotte Manning played the leading role in setting up a group for the focused discussion of carefully prepared papers, which became known as the 'Kensington Society' because it met in Manning's house in that part of west London, with Davies acting as its secretary. However, it was more of a national society than previous gatherings of female activists as it consciously aimed to bring together women from different social circles who did not already

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know one another.²¹ It eventually had almost seventy members and gathered quarterly for presentations and discussions for three years, becoming increasingly focused on the issue of women's parliamentary suffrage, partly because it also drew in a significantly more Radical current under the influence of Mentia Taylor. Davies certainly supported the idea of increased political participation on the part of women but was uneasy about moving too fast: she still feared that such an advanced demand might provoke a reactionary backlash and upset her own more careful, almost technical, step-by-step work in the education field. When she expressed this explicitly to others, it came quite naturally to her to compare it with the by then conventional parallel of slavery:

I don't think I agree with you that rights ought to be seized by force. Take the extreme case of Slavery. It would surely be better that the right of freedom should be restored by the people who have stolen it, than that it should be extorted by an insurrection of the slaves. As to the suffrage, my view is that, the object of representation being, not to confer privileges but to get the best possible government, women should be politely invited to contribute their share of intelligence in the selection of the legislative body. As to their 'asserting their rights successfully & irresistibly', the idea is, if I may say so, rather revolting to my mind.²²

Bodichon, however, was enthusiastic about fighting energetically for the extension of the franchise to women and led the way. Somewhat against her own judgment, Davies allowed herself to be carried along and it seems, from the way she remembered it later, that it was a lot of fun. First, they campaigned in support of John Stuart Mill's candidacy as a Liberal MP for Westminster in the spring of 1865 on a manifesto of explicit commitment to female suffrage. He was successful, but Davies was rather ironic about how much her circle really contributed:

I remember that Mrs Bodichon hired a carriage, occupied by herself, Isa Craig, Bessie Parkes & myself, with Mr Herman Bicknell on the box, with placards upon it, to drive about Westminster. We called it giving Mr Mill our moral support, but there was some suspicion that we might rather be doing him harm, as one of our friends told us he had heard him described as 'the man who wants to have girls in Parliament.'²³

Then, in the spring of 1866, they organised a petition in support of extending the householder suffrage to women, which achieved almost 1,500 signatures.²⁴ Ironically, as Bodichon was increasingly unwell and frequently abroad, it was Davies who began to take over as the key, if characteristically low-profile, figure in this first extra-parliamentary campaign for the vote for women. This involved her in several meetings with Helen Taylor (1831–1907) and visits to her father, John Stuart Mill, at his home in Blackheath, which Davies much enjoyed. Then, it was she, along with Elizabeth Garrett Anderson (1836–1917), who took the petition over to Mill in Westminster for presentation to the House of Commons on 7 April 1866. This was perhaps the high point of Davies's involvement in national political life and, scrupulous memoirist as she was, she still remembered it vividly years later:

... we walked up & down the Hall, E. Garrett carrying the Petition, amid a crowd of people. The large roll was somewhat conspicuous, & not easy to conceal, so we asked an old applewoman to put it behind her stall. Almost immediately after, Mr Mill appeared, finding us empty-handed. It was an embarrassing moment. E. Garrett, almost choking with suppressed laughter, said in broken accents, 'we've put it down.' It was of course at once recovered, & Mr Mill, taking it up and waving it in the air, said 'I can brandish this with effect.'²⁵

Subsequently, it was Davies who coordinated a publicity campaign to keep up the pressure over the second half of the year and who became the real administrative force behind the first Suffrage Committee to be set up in Britain.²⁶ But, of course, she had also been correct at the outset in having thought this was all somewhat premature. Mill's attempt to move an amendment to extend the householder franchise across the gender divide by replacing the word 'men' with 'persons' in the debate over the Reform Bill on 20 May 1867 was roundly defeated without the majority of MPs even turning up to listen or to vote. Davies was grateful to Mill for having made his intervention and satisfied that there had been a serious discussion of the issue in parliament for the first time but, seeing that the opening which had been offered briefly by the debates on the passing of the Second Reform Bill would be closed for the foreseeable future, she dropped out of the Suffrage Committee and left the work of keeping up the long-term pressure on votes for women to the

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Girton College,
Cambridge, ca
1890/1900

Radicals.²⁷ For, that gave her the time to focus on her more immediate educational projects and, 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.

Of course, Girton College is still there today, considerably larger and looking so much like a venerable Victorian establishment in its own now picturesque grounds that it is probably not immediately obvious to most visitors what a visionary and courageous effort it took to get it going in the 1860s, before women could even take part fully in the professions let alone cast their votes in parliamentary elections. Its main mover, Emily Davies, was an Anglican and Conservative but she was surrounded by women who were Nonconformists and Liberals or Radicals, and who mostly came from families long immersed in campaigning for the abolition of slavery. Davies may have been alternately frustrated and amused by the Radicals and wary of being seen as too closely associated with them and their methods, but she had been right at the centre of all the progressive events of the early 1860s during

which the women's movement became a significant presence on the British political stage for the first time: the first women's national anti-slavery organisation in 1863, the overwhelming response to Garibaldi's visit to London in 1864, the establishment of a national intellectual forum for the discussion of women's issues, the election of John Stuart Mill to parliament in 1865, the presentation to Mill of the first petition for women's suffrage and the formation of the first committee in pursuit of that cause in 1866. So, if the successful establishment of the first College for Women three years later is to be understood in terms broader than the power of individual personalities and the successive steps they took to achieve their specific educational aims, it can be seen as part of a wider wave of enthusiasm for extending democracy and participation initially sparked off by support for the anti-slavery aims of the North in the American Civil War. It might seem a long way from Gettysburg to Girton, but the links in the chain were direct and continuous.

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