

there is very little of significance reported, an omission which reduces the impact of the novel. Venetia's escape from an increasingly needy man is similarly not preceded in her fictional letters

by any doubts about the morality of her friendship, with or without any sexual activity.

This reviewer's conclusion – read the novel and ignore the history.

Alan Mumford is the author of several articles in the *Journal of Liberal History*, including 'Asquith: Friendship, Love and Betrayal' and 'Five Liberal Women' and a review of S. Buzacki, *My Darling Mr Asquith*.

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Biography of an extraordinary woman

Jane Robinson, *Trailblazer: Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, the first feminist to change our world* (Doubleday, 2024)

Review by Sarah Richardson

Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon had an impeccable political pedigree. She was the granddaughter of the abolitionist MP and member of the Clapham Sect, William Smith. Her father, Benjamin, followed William into Parliament and represented the same two constituencies: Sudbury and Norwich. Both were Unitarians, active in leading Dissenting circles, promoting the radical causes of the day. In her new biography of Barbara, Jane Robinson sketches out her illustrious connections in the form of a sunflower, with Barbara at the centre, radiating links with significant political, literary and cultural contemporaries. Her cousin was Florence Nightingale, she was friends with Dante and Christina Rossetti, George Eliot, Bessie Rayner Parkes and Emily Davies (to name but a few).

Benjamin Leigh Smith was a wealthy businessman, making his fortune in the distillery trade. He had even bailed out his father

who had been on the brink of bankruptcy. When Barbara reached the age of 21, Benjamin gave her a portfolio of shares which yielded around £250–350 per year, making her an independently wealthy woman, free to pursue her own philanthropic and political projects. Although she married in 1857, her relationship with her eccentric husband, Eugène Bodichon, was unconventional. They often lived separately, even in different countries, and she continued to pursue her own separate projects.

Yet, in spite of this seemingly gilded life, Barbara was tainted by the stigma of illegitimacy. Her father embarked on a relationship with her mother, Anne Longden of Alfreton in Derbyshire. She bore him five children before her untimely death at the age of 32, but the couple were never married, meaning that Barbara and her siblings were shunned by many in the family (including Florence Nightingale and her mother Fanny) and in society.

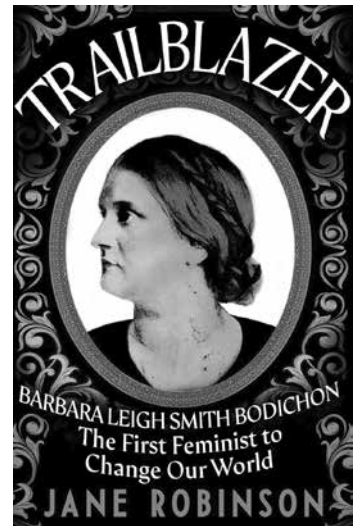
Robinson's lively prose teases out the paradoxes of Barbara's life breathlessly. The book is meticulously researched, using private and public archives in the UK and abroad. However, historians may hesitate at her use of her imagination when factual sources are scarce. In her discussion of Ben and Anne's relationship for example, Robinson rejects the view of historians that he was acting in concordance with his radical ideology, which eschewed the inequalities in marriage. Instead, she alludes to her favourite Shakespeare play, *The Taming of the Shrew*, imagining a different ending where Kate stands up to Petruchio who falls in love with her feistiness. Thus, she envisages Anne as a high-spirited woman who refused to marry Ben, rather than the other way around.

Later, Robinson acknowledges that she 'can't avoid speculation. And I can't resist anecdote, rumour and trivia: they all play

their part in reimagining the past' (p. 272). She then departs from a scholarly narrative and paraphrases from a random selection of sources a list of Barbara's thoughts. This creates unevenness and appears to be unnecessary when there is such a wealth of source material.

Robinson is also given to hyperbole. The frontispiece states: 'You may not know the name Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon. It has quietly been erased from history.' This is not true. The author, herself, cites a wide range of secondary sources which include multiple biographies of Barbara. Readers taking a brief glance at studies of nineteenth-century feminism, women's suffrage or higher education will not fail to find Barbara's name prominent in discussions of female political activists. She played a significant part in, and financed, some of the key feminist projects of the nineteenth century including the right of married women to retain their property, widening the scope of women's employment, suffrage and education. But was she the *first* feminist to change our world as stated in the sub-title? As the biography itself notes, she was part of a network of significant women activists and her contribution should be viewed alongside the work of others. Public recognition of her role was more muted though, in part because of her radicalism but also because of her unconventional background.

Like many female politicians of the period, Barbara primarily used her pen to influence opinion. She published key pamphlets on the laws pertaining to women, women and work, and reasons for and against female enfranchisement. However, she was also instrumental in co-founding the Langham Place circle, the pre-eminent group of talented women campaigners, artists, writers and intellectuals in the mid nineteenth century. The group was established because of the friendship between Barbara Smith Bodichon and Bessie Rayner Parkes and encompassed many of the leading women's rights campaigners of the day including Matilda Hays, Jessie Boucherett, Adelaide Procter and Emily Davies. The activities of the circle and their publication the *English Woman's Journal* provided a platform for the advancement of feminist projects including the suffrage, the reform of married women's property rights, education and increased employment opportunities for women. Again, Robinson resorts to a fictional account of what it must have been like working at the office of the *English Woman's Journal* rather than drawing upon the extant sources and rich archives of the women who worked there. This does distinguish her account from the many books and articles which explore this important organisation, but it is not always convincing.



In May 1866, Barbara was the inspiration for the launch the first mass women's suffrage petition which proved pivotal in creating national movements campaigning for women to gain the vote. Barbara spoke on women's suffrage at an early meeting of the Kensington Society, which met to converse, debate and critique important contemporary issues. Her talk led to the decision to petition parliament to include a measure of female enfranchisement within any reform of the electoral system. Barbara had a strong track record in well-positioned petitioning to further feminist causes. In 1856 she, along with Bessie Rayner Parkes, had coordinated a petition to reform the laws on married women's property rights with over 3,000 signatories, among them high-profile women such as Jane Carlyle, Elizabeth Gaskell, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Harriet Martineau. The petition was drafted by Helen Taylor, stepdaughter

of John Stuart Mill, and its wording was honed by Barbara, Jessie Boucherett and Emily Davies. Mill, MP for Westminster, had agreed to present the petition to parliament if there were over one hundred women signatories, in the event, there were 1,521, achieved in a matter of weeks. The petition was presented to the Commons by Mill in front of a packed Ladies' Gallery. However, as Robinson notes, Barbara was absent, perhaps because of her illegitimacy. It is her absences, as well as her commanding contributions which form a key motif to the biography.

Her name was also missing from the executive committee formed to establish the first college for women at the University of Cambridge, although she was the major donor and an equal driving force along with Emily Davies. Barbara ultimately succeeded in her desire to locate the college from distant Hitchin to Girton on the outskirts of Cambridge. She donated paintings and furnishings and also left the college £10,000 in her will, which

safeguarded its future. Barbara's influence on future feminists thankful for her activism and achievements led to Irene Baker and Lesley Abdela repairing her grave in Brightling in 2007 and Girton College recognising her key founding role, along with Emily Davies, with a blue plaque, unveiled by Baroness Hale in 2019. Barbara's important legacy is not directly addressed in the biography perhaps because it runs counter to the view that she has been erased from history.

The book is lavishly illustrated with colour plates and black and white sketches demonstrating Barbara's skill as a professional artist as well as depicting aspects of her life, family and friendship circle. Many have come from the private archive of Barbara's descendants and provide powerful visual insights into, especially, her personal life. They also serve as a reminder that in her art, as with other aspects of her life, Barbara was a campaigner and activist. She helped to establish the Society for Female Artists and

petitioned the Royal Academy to admit women students. Robinson notes that her bequest of her watercolours to the Tate was refused, which means that much of her work is now lost.

Trailblazer is a highly readable commemoration of an extraordinary woman. It focuses most attention on Barbara's personal unconventional connections: with her father, her aunts, her eccentric husband, and her friends and protégés. This means that coverage of some of her feminist projects are compressed. However, the biography does much to remind us of the eclectic, colourful and pioneering lives of many female Victorian campaigners which run counter to dominant views of strait-laced, retiring, pious individuals. It is important that the contributions of women like Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon are celebrated and remembered.

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Fifty election campaigns

Iain Dale (ed.), *British General Election Campaigns 1830–2019* (Biteback, 2024)

Review by Mark Pack

Iain Dale has carved out an impressive niche as the driving force behind a series of multi-authored compilations of political history (and alternative

political histories too, exploring topics such as what if Jeremy Corbyn had become Prime Minister). His latest, *British General Election Campaigns 1830–2019*, continues

his tradition of putting together highly impressive author lists for very readable volumes.

The fifty general elections in this volume are covered by 49