

Mary Augusta Ward and the Opposition to Women's Suffrage¹

Maroula Joannou, Anglia Polytechnic University

Feminist scholarship has usually focused on the women's suffrage movement while finding both the organised opposition to women's enfranchisement and the publicly stated attitudes to votes for women of some of the most respected nineteenth-century women authors much less congenial as an area of historical and literary enquiry. Charlotte Bronte was unimpressed by John Stuart Mill's ideas on equality. In a letter to Elizabeth Gaskell who also opposed women's suffrage, Bronte wrote that 'J.S. Mills' head is, I daresay, very good, but I feel disposed to scorn his heart'.² George Eliot, despite creating the intelligent, strong-willed heroines of Middlemarch (1871-2) and The Mill on the Floss (1860), was against votes for women: 'Enfranchisement of Women' only makes creeping progress; and that is best, for woman does not yet deserve a much better lot than man gives her.'³ Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti were also firmly situated in the anti-suffragist camp.

But if anti-suffragism has been described by one historian as 'the obvious destination for a well-to-do late Victorian literary woman'⁴ the women's suffrage movement could also call upon the loyalties of many writers, ranging from the veteran 'New Woman' novelists Olive Schreiner and Sarah Grand, to the novelist of Anglo-India, Flora Annie Steel and the crime fiction writer, Marie Belloc Lowndes, all of whom were prepared to give their time and effort to the 'cause'.

The connections between literature and women's suffrage have been richly explored by feminists in recent years. Glenda Norquay's anthology, Voices and

¹ I am indebted to my colleague, Nora Crook for reading and commenting helpfully on this essay.

² Letter from Charlotte Bronte to Elizabeth Gaskell dated September 20 1851. Margaret Smith (Ed.) (2000) The Letters of George Eliot, 2 vols, 1995 and 2000, vol. 2 1848-1861 (Oxford: The Clarendon Press), pp.695-695, p.696.

³ Letter from George Eliot to Mrs Peter Alfred Taylor, dated February 1, 1853. Gordon .S. Haight(Ed.), (1954-6, 1978) The George Eliot Letters, 9 vols, vol. 2, 1852-1858 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), p.86.

⁴ Brian Harrison (1978) Separate Spheres: the Opposition to Women's Suffrage (London: Croom Helm), p. 22.

Votes (1995) has usefully disseminated examples of hitherto neglected suffragette fiction and poetry to students in higher education. Sowon Park's research has illuminated the work of the Women Writers' Suffrage League. Forgotten novels by suffragettes, such as Gertrude Colmore's Suffragette Sally (1911) and Elizabeth Robins' The Convert (1907),⁵ as well as examples of suffragette drama and autobiography, have been republished and are now much better known to the reading public than they were. This recent research and recovery informs and enhances our understanding of the culture of the women's suffrage movement as a whole. Yet the work of Victorian and Edwardian anti-suffragist novelists is also necessary to the completion of the historical record.

This essay begins to develop a critical and contextual framework to account for the importance that the writings of anti-suffragist novelists have often had for the women reader, and suggests ways in which their work may be usefully mined by historians and literary scholars interested in the history of the vote. I want to discuss the tensions and contradictions to be found in the writing and public work of the best-known of the anti-suffragists, Mary Augusta Ward. As Lucy Delap reminds us, 'Strikingly similar rhetoric informed both 'Anti' and suffragist political argument.'⁶ Ward's reforming imagination, commitment to women's service, and sympathetic literary depictions of friendships between women, the hallmarks of much of her fiction, lend weight to the argument that

⁵ Glenda Norquay (Ed.) (1995) Voices and Votes: a Literary Anthology of the women's suffrage campaign (Manchester: The Manchester University Press), Sowon Park (2000) 'Doing Justice to the Real Girl': The Woman Writers' Suffrage League', in Claire Eustance, Joan Ryan and Laura Ugolini (eds), A Suffrage Reader: Charting Directions in British Suffrage History (London: Leicester University Press), pp. 90-104. Gertrude Colmore (1911) Suffragette Sally (1911) reprinted as Suffragettes: the Story of Three Women (London: Pandora, 1984) and Elizabeth Robins' (1907) The Convert (London: Methuen reprinted (1980) (London: Virago).

⁶ Lucy Delap (2002) 'Philosophical Vacuity and Political Ineptitude': The Freewoman's critique of the suffrage movement', Women's History Review, vol. 11, no 4, pp. 613-630, p.624.

there is more common ground between suffragists and 'Antis' than is sometimes supposed.⁷

Ward was the principal architect of the 'Forward Policy' (1908-1914) within the ranks of the organised anti-suffragists which has been discussed in the Women's History Review by Julia Bush.⁸ She was also the author of one novel, Delia Blanchflower (1915)⁹ in which the issue of votes for women, touched on in her earlier fiction, occurs as a key issue in the narrative. This is set at the high point of suffragette militancy when the public had been shocked by a series of startling outrages – 'destruction of some of the nation's noblest pictures, in the National Gallery and elsewhere, defacement of churches, personal attacks on Ministers – by the members of various militant societies' (DB, p.136).¹⁰

Politically aligned with the progressive factions within the anti-suffrage cause, Ward scrupulously disassociated herself from the misogynistic sentiments expressed by some prominent male 'Antis'. The outlook of the progressivists was characterised by Janet Courtney who served on the committee of the Anti-Suffrage League. As Courtney put it much later, 'we had no desire to stop the women's movement. We merely wanted to regulate its pace and to prevent a

⁷ This position has gained support among critics. For two excellent discussions of the contradictions in Ward's work see Valerie Saunders (1997) Eve's Renegades: Victorian Anti-Feminist Women Novelists (London: Palgrave, 1997) and Beth Sutton-Ramspeck, 'Shot out of the Canon: Mary Ward and the Claims of Conflicting Feminism', in Nicola Diane Thompson (ed.), Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 1-24. Sowon Park is doing important work in this area and has kindly allowed me to read two unpublished essays, 'Love or the Vote? Romance in Feminist Fiction with special reference to H.G. Wells' Ann Veronica and Mrs Humphry Ward's Delia Blanchflower and 'Suffragettes in Fiction'.

⁸ Julia Bush (2002) 'British Women's Anti-Suffragism and the Forward Policy, 1908-14', Women's History Review, vol. 11, no 3, pp. 431-54.

⁹ Mrs Humphry Ward, (1915) Delia Blanchflower (London: Ward, Lock). All quotations are from the first English edition and given in parenthesis in my text. The publication date in the United States is 1914. American reviews were appearing as early as the autumn of 1914. See <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/Collections/English/ward3.html#contents>.

¹⁰ This is an exaggeration because paintings were damaged rather than destroyed by the suffragettes.

noisy minority from bringing us all into discredit'. With hindsight Courtney speculated that 'perhaps we should have done better to turn ourselves into a right wing of the constitutional suffragists.' ¹¹

Ward's ideas about women, although open to criticism as irredeemably sentimental, romantic, naïve, impractical, idealistic, and, by the latter stages of her career, outmoded, are essentially positive and benign. As Elaine Showalter has noted, Ward had a strong 'desire to see woman's maternal energies turned outward and she believed in the beneficent effects of altruistic sisterhood'. ¹² This took many practical forms, including the publication of a leaflet on how to feed babies which was distributed in working-class areas of Oxford. In common with many feminists of her day Ward believed in the importance of women's service and the power of women's moral influence. The difference was that Ward took upon herself the 'task of diverting and of carrying forward the Woman's Movement into other lines than those which led to Westminster'. ¹³

Although her novels are now no longer much read Ward was a towering figure in late Victorian literary circles, largely on the reputation of Robert Elsmere (1888), a novel which appeared to be critical of religious orthodoxy and had caused a sensation at the time of publication. Ward's monumental work depicts the ethical dilemmas of a young Anglican clergyman who is converted to Christian Socialism and is estimated to have sold around a million copies by 1912. ¹⁴ By the 1880s Ward's name had acquired liberal overtones: 'Gladstone rebuked her in the pages of the Nineteenth Century for imperilling the foundations of the Christian religion.' ¹⁵ Reading Robert Elsmere converted the

¹¹ Janet E. Courtney (1934) The Women of My Time (London: Lovat Dickson), p.174.

¹² Elaine Showalter (1978) A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists From Charlotte Bronte to Doris Lessing (London: Virago), p.228.

¹³ Janet Penrose Trevelyan (1923) The Life of Mrs Humphry Ward (London: Constable).

¹⁴ Alfred Fawkes (July 1912) 'The Ideas of Mrs Humphry Ward', The Quarterly Review, no 432, pp.1-20, p. 3.

¹⁵ Courtney, The Woman of My Time, p. 133

young Vera Brittain 'from an unquestioning if somewhat indifferent church-goer into an anxiously interrogative agnostic.'¹⁶

In a review of Janet Penrose Trevelyan biography of her mother in 1924, Virginia Woolf wrote that 'none of the the great Victorian reputations has sunk lower than that of Mrs Humphry Ward.'¹⁷ Indeed, 'vilification of Mrs Humphry Ward' had reached 'the level of a minor art form.'¹⁸ As Jane Marcus puts it, 'Ward's formidable presence must have seemed to those radical young women like a female equivalent of the statue of Don Giovanni, a matriarchal bulwark, against whom the "freewomen" threw the manifesto of their paper.'¹⁹ But Ward was not, in William Peterson's words, 'merely another victim of the rampant anti-Victorianism of the early decades of the [twentieth] century,'²⁰ a rather obvious Aunt Sally for self-conscious 'moderns' in open revolt against the *mores* of the previous age. Many attempts to diminish her reputation had taken place during the nineteenth-century. Ward herself thought that her prominent role in the anti-suffrage movement, culminating in the writing of Delia Blanchflower, had cost her popularity and 'had a markedly bad effect on the circulation of her books.'²¹

Ward published her fiction under her married name, Mrs Humphry Ward although much of her discursive writing and correspondence appeared under the name Mary A. Ward. The 'A' in her signature indicated either her maiden name of Arnold or possibly her middle name of Augusta, and also avoided any possibility of confusion with Mary Ward (1851-83), who signed the Declaration in Favour of

¹⁶ Vera Brittain (1933) Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900-1925 (London: Gollancz), p. 41.

¹⁷ Virginia Woolf, review of Janet Penrose Trevelyan, The Life of Mrs Humphry Ward, The New Republic, January 9, 1924, reprinted in Mary Lyon (Ed.) (1977) Books and Portraits: Some Further Selections From the Literary and Biographical Writings of Virginia Woolf (London: The Hogarth Press), pp.141-42, p.141.

¹⁸ John Sutherland (1990) Mrs Humphry Ward: Eminent Victorian, Pre-Eminent Edwardian (Oxford: The Clarendon Press), p.201.

¹⁹ Jane Marcus (Ed.) The Young Rebecca: Writings of Rebecca West 1911-1917 (London: Macmillan), p.19.

²⁰ William Peterson (1975) Victorian Heretic: Mrs Humphry Ward's Robert Elsmere (Leicester: Leicester University Press), p. 3.

²¹ Trevelyan, The Life of Mrs Humphry Ward, p.239.

Women's Suffrage in 1899, was secretary of the Cambridge Women's Suffrage Association from 1905-15, and wrote the popular pro-suffrage propaganda play, Man and Woman (1908).

The title Mrs Humphry Ward projected her desired self-image of wife and mother but also camouflaged her distinguished family inheritance: Née Mary Arnold, she was a granddaughter of the reforming headmaster, Thomas Arnold of Rugby and a niece of the poet, Matthew Arnold. Jane Arnold, her aunt, married W.E. Forster who was responsible for the Education Act of 1870. Her husband Thomas Humphry Ward was a tutor of Brasenose College, Oxford and her daughter Janet married the historian G.M. Trevelyan. Ward was the aunt of the writers Julian and Aldous Huxley and the main bread-winner in a family which she supported financially through her earnings as a professional writer, a role that she conspicuously does not allow to the heroines of her novels.

A member of the Arnold family, Ward inherited the mantle of the Victorian intellectual aristocracy and much that went with it especially the family tradition of public service. As Vineta Colby has put it, 'early and permanently associated with them was a cachet of *noblesse oblige*. In a bourgeois, secular society they represented an ideal – the cultivated mind and conscience, the aristocracy of learning, dedicated public service and ethical conduct, the religion not so much of the Book as of the book.'²²

Ward was an impassioned advocate of higher education for women and continued the family ideal of public service by becoming the secretary to the committee which founded one of the first women's colleges, Somerville in Oxford in 1878. Later the money earned from her writing made possible the founding of the Passmore Edwards Settlement on the lines of Toynbee Hall. The settlement in Tavistock Place, London, still functions as an institute of adult and community education and is now known as the Mary Ward Centre. Another reforming initiative was the foundation of the Invalid Children's School in 1899. The establishment of an educational programme for mentally and

²² Vineta Colby (1970) The Singular Anomaly: Women Novelists of the Ninetenth-Century (New York: New York University Press), p.112.

physically handicapped children, a cause which is dear to the heart of Mark Winnington, her philanthropic hero in Delia Blanchflower, was taken up by the London County Council and later nationally: 'Nothing of the kind had ever before been attempted in any country ... it was another of those pioneer works which our author seems particularly to have loved'.²³ Even at her own settlement Ward could not escape from suffragists. The nurse in charge of the invalid children's scheme at the turn of the century was Sarah Carwin, who joined the WSPU, was arrested several times, and went on hunger strike.²⁴

As her work for the settlement demonstrates, Ward's commitment to women's service included practical support for the poor (provided that is that they showed no resentment of their situation or dangerous signs of politicisation). Janet Trevelyan wrote of her mother that 'Mrs Humphry Ward was no democrat. She was willing to wear herself out for Mrs Smith, of Peabody Buildings, and her children, but she could not believe that it would do Mrs Smith any good to become the prey of the political agitator.'²⁵ Ward's sparring partner of old, the veteran constitutional suffragist Millicent Garrett Fawcett, always considered her opponent to be a social reformer whose *forte* was philanthropic work but who had somehow wandered into the wrong camp on women's suffrage. The two women had many animated exchanges on the issue of the vote over the years, most notably at a public debate on February 28 1909, held under the auspices of the St Pancras Committee of the London Society for Women's Suffrage, which took place on Ward's home ground of the Passmore Edwards settlement, and at which the latter was decisively defeated by supporters of votes for women.²⁶

Ward was the author and key instigator of The 'Appeal Against Women's Suffrage' that appeared in The Nineteenth Century in June 1889. The

²³ J. Stuart Walters (1912) Mrs Humphry Ward: Her Life and Influence (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner), p.146.

²⁴ Elizabeth Crawford (2001) The Women's Suffrage Movement: a Reference Guide 1866-1928 (London: Routledge), p.99.

²⁵ Trevelyan, The Life of Mrs Humphry Ward, p.233.

²⁶ Debate between Mrs Humphry Ward and Mrs Henry Fawcett, L.I.d, leaflet n.d, Women's National Anti-Suffrage League, WNASL archive, the Women's Library, London.

canvassing of 104 eminent women's signatures opposed to women's suffrage was, by any standards, an impressive act of political mobilisation, ironically illustrating the organisational skills that women were often thought to lack. However, as Garrett Fawcett pointed out, the 'women who have worked with others for the object of lifting the lives of women to a higher level educationally, socially and industrially, are not on the Nineteenth Century List'.²⁷

The document set the tone for Ward's subsequent public utterances, not only in its impassioned hostility to the vote but also in its equally fervent defence of women's virtues, abilities and achievements, a juxtaposition which occurs time and time again in Ward's public statements. While the rhetoric of 'the Appeal' is redolent of the Victorian pieties about women, it also moves significantly beyond these sentiments. Indeed, had the tone of the document not been so sympathetic to some aspects of women's aspirations it would be difficult to understand why many of the signatories, including Beatrice Potter, Louise Creighton, Charlotte Green and Violet Markham (all of whom later changed sides) would have added their names.

Beatrice Webb later explained her reasons for signing: 'Conservative by temperament... I had reacted against my father's overvaluation of women relatively to men; and the narrow outlook and exasperated tone of some of the pioneers of woman's suffrage had intensified this reaction ... But at the root of my anti-feminism lay the fact that I had never myself suffered the disabilities assumed to arise from my sex.'²⁸ The July 1889 issue of the Nineteenth Century carried a reply from Millicent Garrett Fawcett pointing out that a 'consideration of the Nineteenth Century list of names shows that it contains a very large preponderance of ladies to whom the lines of life have fallen in pleasant places. There are very few among them of the women who have had to face the battle of

²⁷ Millicent Garrett Fawcett (26 July, 1889) 'The Appeal Against Female Suffrage: a Reply, Nineteenth Century, pp.86-96, 88.

²⁸ Beatrice Webb (1926) My Apprenticeship (London: Longmans, Green), pp. 354-5.

life alone, to earn their living by daily hard work. Women of this class generally feel the injustice of their want of representation.’²⁹

The ‘Appeal’ remains one of the clearest statements of the contradictions inherent in the late nineteenth-century pro-woman but anti-suffrage position. Not least, as a highly effective political intervention in the public sphere, organised by and restricted to women, it illustrates the irony of the conservative position that women ought to desist from involvement in public affairs. The signatories profess themselves ‘heartily in sympathy with all the recent efforts which have been made to give women a more important part in those affairs of the community where their interests and those of men are equally concerned.’³⁰ Thus Ward and her fellow signatories ‘cordially welcome’ the participation of women on ‘School Boards, Boards of Governors, and other important bodies’ together with the ‘great improvements in women’s education’. However, women deference to male leadership in the colonies was legitimated by the innate differences between the sexes, ‘when it comes to questions of foreign or colonial policy, or of grave constitutional change, then we maintain that the necessary and normal experience of women - – speaking generally and in the mass - – does not and can never provide them with such materials or sound judgement are as open to men.’³¹

As Constance Rover has argued, it is a mistake to assume that most women in the ranks of the ‘antis’ had come to a considered conclusion that it was to their advantage to keep to the traditional role of the sexes.³² However, many ‘antis’, including Ward, accepted the ‘physical force argument’ against women’s suffrage whereby citizenship was defined in terms of the ability to take up arms in defence of one’s country. The logic of this position was to disqualify women as full citizens and to deny them the vote. For Ward the home functioned as an

²⁹ Millicent Garrett Fawcett, ‘The Appeal Against Female Suffrage: a Reply’, p.88.

³⁰ ‘Appeal Against Female Suffrage’ (25 June 1889) The Nineteenth Century, pp. 781-88, p.782.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Constance Rover (1967) Women’s Suffrage and Party Politics in Britain 1866-1914 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul), p.171.

analogy of the state -- as a sphere of responsibilities but not rights. Like the suffragists, she deployed a rhetoric of “civic housekeeping”,³³ a justification being that the word ‘economy’ originally meant belonging to the home. It is only in the eighteenth-century that the term domestic economy became current. Thus in pursuing her advocacy of women’s participation in municipal affairs, their presence on school boards, and involvement in useful work in their localities, all of which she saw as a proper extension of the domestic ideology of her time and of women’s nurturing and maternal roles, Ward is reappropriating the ‘economy’ from the exclusively national application that it had acquired.³⁴

Ward was Chairman of the Local Government Advancement Committee (Anti-Suffrage) which in theory differentiated between women’s service at a local and national level. In practice this distinction proved difficult to sustain. The Anti-Suffrage Review regularly carried reports or letters about the achievements of women in local government and appeals to more women to put themselves forward. Ward also sought to make common cause with the constitutional suffragists but Garrett Fawcett took umbrage at the suggestions that the ‘suffrage associations should abandon our main object and purposes in return for her giving her personal adhesion to votes for women for local parliaments’ as tantamount to proposing ‘that the Church of England should abandon Christianity in exchange for her withdrawing Robert Elsmere from circulation.’³⁵ Ward met but desisted from arguing with the leader of the militants, Christabel Pankhurst through the agency of a mutual friend, the novelist and suffragette, Violet Hunt. Hunt wrote that the ‘Queen of our Cause was anxious to see if she could “get over her”, with her puissant charm that so seldom failed. Dear, kind Mrs. Ward, to please me, consented, on the condition that Christabel did not tackle her on the subject of politics.’³⁶

Ward became President of the Women’s National Anti-Suffrage Society (the title carefully chosen to avoid the acronym of Ass) in 1908. Her inaugural

³³ Lucy Delap, ‘The New Freewoman’s Critique of the Suffrage Movement’, p.624.

³⁴ I am grateful to Nora Crook for this point.

³⁵ Ray Strachey (1931) Millicent Garrett Fawcett (London: John Murray), p. 271.

³⁶ Violet Hunt (1926) The Flurried Years (London: Hurst and Blackett), p.107.

address laid emphasis upon '[d]ifference, not inferiority – it is on that we take our stand.'³⁷ In 1909 she toured the country addressing meetings in Bristol, Cambridge, Manchester, Birmingham and Newcastle. But her appearance on public platforms to persuade other women that a woman's place was in the home was an irony that was not lost on suffragists and the 'antis' public meetings were, in the main, pallid imitations of the much larger and livelier meetings organised by the suffragettes.

The Men's League for Opposing Women's Suffrage was formed in 1909. The organisation was dominated by the two pro-Consuls, Lord Cromer and Lord Curzon motivated by their objections to women's influence on imperial policy which was jealously safeguarded as an exclusively male preserve. Ward, who as a member of the council of the Victoria League,³⁸ an organisation set up in 1901 to disseminating information about the empire of interest to women, was in sympathy with male anti-suffragists who believed that the defence of the empire would be placed in jeopardy were women to be given the vote. A character in Delia Blanchflower is made to assert, 'Claim everything – what you like! Except only that sovereign vote, which controls, and must control, the male force of an Empire!' (DB, p. 317).

The men's and women's organisations were very different in character but decided to pool their resources and amalgamate in 1910. Difficulties presented themselves from the outset. In The Cause, Ray Strachey noted that the anti-suffragists had 'some trouble with their own members, particularly with the imposing array of Peers who were their vice-presidents, since these gentlemen objected as strongly to the presence of women on borough councils as anywhere (outside the home)'. According to Strachey, the 'spectacle of their troubles was a constantly recurring delight to their opponents.'³⁹

³⁷ Speech by Mrs Humphry Ward, leaflet no 3, Women's National Anti-Suffrage League, 1908, p. 6, WNASL archive, Women's Library, London.

³⁸ I am indebted to Julia Bush for this information.

³⁹ Ray Strachey (1928) The Cause: A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain (London: G.Bell), pp.319-20.

Cromer admitted to Curzon that he had made a 'serious mistake, of which I am much ashamed' in not securing sufficient concessions from the women before he brought the men's organisation to a close.⁴⁰ Matters came to a head in 1911 after the adoption, with Ward's backing, of Dr Elizabeth Jevons as a candidate for a seat on the London County Council. This precipitated the resignation of Cromer as President: 'I really have not the health, strength, youth, or, I may add, the temper to go on dealing with these infernal women.'⁴¹ Curzon took his place.

On March 28, 1912 a letter from the physician, Sir Almoth Wright was published in The Times. Wright contended that 'there is mixed up with the woman's movement much mental disorder' and that women should be disqualified from voting on the grounds of their propensity to hysteria. This was circulated in error from the premises of the Anti-Suffrage League, without Ward's knowledge or Curzon's endorsement, and both she and Violet Markham wrote separately to The Times to disassociate themselves from Wright's misogyny. Ward argued:

'Because some women holding the extreme suffragist opinions belittle and attack men in general, does it help the cause opposed to them to retaliate in kind? To such sweeping statements as Sir A Wright makes, how easy to reply Chivalry is not on one side, nor weakness either Women have worked in the past, and are working for, as unselfishly and devotedly for men as men have ever worked for women....The violence of men towards women due to their superior physical strength is a dismal chapter, far from closed. Sir A Wright would have done better to admit it.'⁴²

By 1918 women's participation in the First World War had brought about a sea-change in public opinion. Ward now appeared to many as an isolated, stubborn, anachronistic and somewhat quixotic figure, arguing for the last-ditch (and decidedly un-English) stratagem of a referendum on the vote, even after many

⁴⁰ Quoted Brian Harrison, Separate Spheres, p.128.

⁴¹ The Curzon Papers, British Library (CP.MSS Eur. F. 112/33A), February 8 1912, quoted in Bush, 'British Women's Anti-Suffragism', p.451.

⁴² Mary A. Ward, Letter to The Times dated April 12, 1912.

of her erstwhile allies -- including some like Curzon who had seemed equally intransigent before the war -- bowed to the inevitable.

I now turn to the fiction. Ward was a novelist with a purpose, engaged in the controversies of her day, who used the novel as an arena for critical commentary on a range of topical issues, from socialism in Marcella (1894) to Catholicism in England and Italy in Helbeck of Bannisdale (1898), from Christian ethics in Robert Elsmere (1888) to the obligations of landlords and employers in Sir George Tressady (1896).

Ward had touched on the dangers of women's suffrage in Diana Mallory (1908), in which the young Diana introduces herself enthusiastically as an imperialist. Diana's 'starved devotion for the England she had never known, had spent itself upon the Englands she found beyond the seas' in her first-hand experience of the work of her compatriots in India, Egypt and Canada. The *dramatis personae* of this novel includes a socialist clergyman who is a 'Little Englander' and Isobel Fotheringham, a suffragist who personifies the links between women's suffrage and the loss of empire by denouncing militarism and greeting the British losses on the Afghan frontier as "'very satisfactory'" because the nation 'required the lesson'.⁴³ However, it was the WSPU's arson campaign and the outrage caused by the burning of churches, works of art, and some private property that allowed Ward to make full capital out of the mood of public hostility to suffragette militancy. The arson campaign provides the backdrop to Delia Blanchflower when 'every unknown woman who approached a village, or strolled into a village church, was immediately noticed, immediately reported on, by hungry eyes and tongues alert for catastrophe; and every empty house had become an anxiety to its owners.' (DB, pp.136-7)

⁴³ Mrs Humphry Ward (1908) Diana Mallory (London: Smith and Elder, 1908), p.10, p.84.

Suffragette arson had reached a crescendo in 1913.⁴⁴ Lady White's house at Englefield Green near Staines, was destroyed by suffragettes on 20 March 1913 and the residence of a well-known 'anti', the Liberal MP, Arthur du Cross, burnt down at St Leonards in April of that year.⁴⁵ Twenty-five thousand pounds of damage was done when Ballikrinain Castle was burned down in June and twenty thousand pounds when Sir William Lever's bungalow was set alight in July 1913. On May 15 1913 alarm was caused in the picturesque village of Albury in Hertfordshire where the Wards lived. Ward's daughter, Dorothy noted 'two mysterious women with rubber shoes were prowling about the churchyard last night.'⁴⁶

At its simplest, Delia Blanchflower is the story of a beautiful 'New Woman' who, much against the wishes of her legal guardian Mark Winnington, falls disastrously under the influence of an embittered militant suffragette, Gertrude Marvell. The peace and order of the countryside is disturbed by an outbreak of suffragette militancy. Unbeknown to Delia, the 'Daughters of Rebellion' conspire to set fire to an ancient country house, Monk Lawrence. Marvell perishes in the flames as does the handicapped daughter of a faithful old retainer. In practice, the suffragette's respect for human life and their careful reconnoitring of empty buildings ensured that nobody died as a consequence of the arson campaign. Their rule was that 'not a cat, dog or canary shall be harmed'.⁴⁷ Marvell's words as she turns back to look at her handiwork: '*Beauty!* And what about the beauty that men destroy? Let them *pay!*' (DB, p.392) are reminiscent of those attributed to Mary Richardson who slashed the Velazquez Rokeby Venus in the National

⁴⁴ Michael Rosen (1974) Rise Up Women!: The Militant Campaign of the Women's Social and Political Union, 1903-1914 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul), pp. 202, 201.

⁴⁵ The Suffragette, 20 March 1913, p. 386, The Suffragette, April 25 1913, p.471.

⁴⁶ Dorothy Ward, diary, University College London, May 15 1913, quoted in Sutherland, Mrs Humphry Ward, p.330.

⁴⁷ Antonia Raeburn (1976), Militant Suffragettes (London: New English Library), p. 232.

Gallery in March 1914.⁴⁸ The end of Delia Blanchflower, like the more famous burning of the grand house, as the *finale* of Daphne Du Maurier's Rebecca (1938) or in Henry James' The Spoils of Poynton (1897), appears at once an act of revenge and catharsis.

Until the final sections of the novel there is virtually no exposition of the anti-suffragist case. What Ward does instead is punctuate the novel with statements opposed to the use of violence which are allowed to stand in for discussions about the vote -- as if opposition to one automatically means opposition to the other. As one example, a suffragette open-air meeting is disrupted by the following interjection:

'You've seen about the destroying of letters in London. Well, I'll tell you what that means. I had a little servant I was very fond of ... The sister died, and she got consumption. She went into lodgings and there was no one to help her. She wrote to me, asking me to come to her. Her letter was destroyed in one of the pillar-boxes raided -- by those women!' (DB, pp. 168-9).

The description of the outdoor suffrage meeting at Fotheringham are vividly drawn and based on reportage. They are reminiscent of the Trafalgar Square scenes in Elizabeth Robins' The Convert (1907) which were much admired at the time as examples of close observation and first-hand knowledge.

In Letters to My Neighbour on the Present Election (1910) Ward describes reading the Agricultural Reports of the great Labour Commission while she preparing to write Marcella (1894). What she found accorded perfectly with her belief in benevolent paternalism and *noblesse oblige*: 'England was divided between two types of rural dwelling, the "open" village full of hovels without any resident landlords, where the houses belonged to small owners and were the

⁴⁸ 'I have tried to destroy the picture of the most beautiful woman in mythological history because the Government are destroying Mrs Pankhurst the most beautiful character in modern history', quoted in Roger Fulford (1958) Votes for Women: The Story of a Struggle (London: Faber and Faber), pp. 294-5.

result of speculative building'; and the "close" village belonging to a landed estate, where the cottages had been rebuilt, or efficiently repaired, and were decently maintained.'⁴⁹The Maudsley estate in Delia Blanchflower is such a model community with 'no insanity cottages and no obvious scandals of any sort'. It had always 'been well managed; there were a good many small gentlefolk who lived in the Georgian houses, and owing to the competition of the railways, agricultural wages were rather better than elsewhere.' (DB, p.101) Monk Lawrence represents the continuity, history and tradition threatened by insurrection or demands for revolutionary rather than gradual change.

Ward was troubled by the dangers to her class which was threatened from within by inefficient landowners and bad employers, and from without by disgruntled socialists, trade unionists and Irish nationalists, a displacement on to the moral plane of her dislike of the shifting power relations transforming the nation. In Delia Blanchflower, the weight of human misery which Winnington witnesses in London convinces him that those in the countryside cannot turn their backs on the tide of suffering in metropolitan areas. Ward advocated social reform both as a practical necessity to remove the causes of popular discontent and as a moral duty which revived those who undertook it. With her deep respect for antiquity and tradition she believed the landed classes enshrined Englishness, honourable behaviour, and a long tradition of upholding culture against the forces of anarchy. Mark Winnington, her benevolent landowner in Delia Blanchflower is introduced simply as 'the Englishman'.

Delia Blanchflower begins with a curious 'keen and much attracted spectator' (DB, p.15) of feminine advance, Mark Winnington, a conscientious poor law guardian who runs a modest country estate. Tendentiously conservative, Winnington, cannot help but admire the 'hatless and fearless' young continental women on holiday in the Tyrol: These 'young Atalantas, budding and bloomed, made the strongest impression upon him as of a new race. Where had he been all these years. He felt himself a kind of Rip

⁴⁹ Mary Augusta Ward (1910) Letters to My Neighbours on the Present Election (London: Smith, Elder), pp. 49, 50.

Van Winkle – face to face at forty-one with a generation unknown to him.’
(p.15) Likened to Atalanta in Greek mythology, the modern young woman is represented as both seductive and dangerous; at once a coveted prize for the man who can outrun her and a promise of death for those who try but fall short.

In an article on ‘Contemporary Feminism’ in the Quarterly Winnington reads that such women are ‘turning indiscriminately against the old bonds, the old yokes, affections, servitudes, demanding “self realization”’ (p.4). He is ‘well acquainted, though mainly through the newspapers, with English suffragism moderate and extreme’ (p. 4):‘No one of course could live in England and not be aware of the change which has passed over English girls. (p.15)

Ward’s own admiration for young English womanhood is evident in her dedication of her novel to ‘The Younger Generation’. In Delia Blanchflower she creates an attractive, idealistic heroine by the expedient of representing Delia as an essentially good, albeit naïve and impressionable, young woman who has been led astray by a malignant and manipulative older woman. It is Marvell who diverts her protégée from her ‘natural’ and ‘womanly’ mission of attending to insanitary cottages and ministering to the needs of her tenants through specious argument this is incompatible with her work for women’s suffrage: ‘Look here, Delia, if you are going to play the part of earthly Providence to this village, and your property in general — as I’ve said to you before — you may as well tell the Daughters that you can’t do anything for them. That’s a profession in itself; and would take you all your time.’ (DB, p.72)

Despite Arnold Bennett’s well-known caricatures of Ward’s heroines’ dependence on their ‘lawful male guardians’⁵⁰ Ward’s purposeful, socially aware, intelligent (and often motherless) protagonists, from Laura in Helbeck of Bannisdale (1898) to Julia in Lady Rose’s Daughter (1903), are far from passive. On the contrary, these strong-minded young women often defy

⁵⁰ Arnold Bennett (1917) Books and Persons: Being Comments on a Past Epoch 1908-1911 (London: Chatto and Windus), p.52.

convention, champion free thought, and initiate reform in their locality thus taking their place alongside the other spirited heroines of late Victorian 'New Woman' literature, such as Diana in Meredith's Diana of The Crossways (1885) and Nora in Ibsen's The Dolls'House (1879). Marcella in the eponymous novel reads Marx, joins the Venturists (Fabians), starts a club for young men, raises agricultural wages, goes to live among the poor in London, and finds work as a district nurse before finding her way to Tory collectivism.⁵¹ As Valerie Sanders notes, 'what seems most inconsistent and surprising about the Victorian anti-feminist women novelists' portrayal of men is their failure to glorify them as the natural leaders of society and superior guides within the family.'⁵²

Delia's wilful importation of an alien urban cause into a country district in which women's suffrage has hitherto been of little concern cuts her off from the traditional organic community into which, as Sir Robert Blanchflower's daughter, she rightly belongs. The heroine internalises a vision of herself as an outlaw: 'She saw herself as the anarchist prowling outside, tracked, spied on, held at arm's length by all decent citizens, all lovers of ancient beauty, and moral tradition; while within, women like Susy Amberly sat Madonna-like, with the children at their knee' (DB, p.201). 'Unwomanly' behaviour and neglect of one's dependents through her preoccupation with women's suffrage are the failings for which Gertrude Marvell (who never spoke of her married sister and ignores her ageing mother's plea for her company) is condemned: 'it would matter to me a good deal, if you'd sometimes come in, and sit by the fire a bit, and chat' (p.254). But her mother had 'always stood by the men of the family; and for the men of the family, Gertrude, its eldest daughter, felt nothing but loathing and contempt' (p.255).

The relationship between Delia and Gertrude is a close and loving one: 'If Gertrude Marvell loved anybody, she loved Delia – the captive of her own bow

⁵¹ Another new woman novel, Emma Brookes' Transition (1895) was advertised in Fabian News as an antidote to Marcella. See Kay Daniels (2003) 'Emma Brooke: Fabian, Feminist and Writer', Women's History Review, vol 12, no 2, 2003, pp.153-167.

⁵² Sanders, Eve's Renegades, p.125.

and spear' (DB, p.250) and they become inseparable. But Vineta Colby cautions against superimposing modern sexual sensibilities on an earlier age these intimate 'tender and adoring friendships of women for women friendships 'which modern readers would immediately designate as lesbian' are intended by Ward as 'decorous outlets for her character's passions.'⁵³

Ward's depiction of Gertrude Marvell in Delia Blanchflower as a cold, ruthless harridan, hell bent on corrupting the innocent heroine, is a variant on the theme of discrediting a cause by exposing the personal defects of its adherents. In much the same way D.H. Lawrence shows Clara Dawes' commitment to women's suffrage in Sons and Lovers (1913) as the consequence of a failed marriage and H. G Wells attributes Miss Miniver's suffragette militancy to sexual repression and fear of physical contact with men in Ann Veronica (1908). Gertrude Marvell may also be compared to the character of Olive Chancellor in Henry James's The Bostonians (1886) who attempts to lead her charge, Verena astray. Doris Kilman in Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway (1925) and Winifred Inger in The Rainbow (1915) are other good examples of trusted mentors misusing their authority over impressionable young women. Indeed, Lilian Faderman has suggested that the reason that so many 'twisted' women who perpetuate evil in fiction are associated with education is because this is one of the few spheres where women were historically permitted power and influence.⁵⁴

Delia Blanchflower remains an unapologetic suffragist until the end: 'I am just as much for *women* – I am just as rebellious against their wrongs – as I ever was. I shall be a Suffragist always.' (DB, p.369) Indeed, in addition to Delia the novel contains two highly complimentary depictions of constitutional suffragists, the forthright Lady Tonville who brings to mind Ward's Aunt Fan, a lifelong suffragist, and the saintly Miss Dempsey: 'All Miss Dempsey's life 'had been given to what is called "rescue work" – though she herself rarely called it by

⁵³ Vineta Colby (1970) The Singular Anomaly: Women Novelists of the Nineteenth Century (New York: New York University Press), p.341.

⁵⁴ Lilian Faderman(1980) Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and the Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present (London: Junction Books) , pp.341-43.

that name'...'Scarcely a week went by, that some hand did not lift the latch, and some girl in her first trouble, or some street-walker, dying of her trade, did not step into the tiny hall' (DB, p.164).

These two characters pass Ward's litmus test of approval in being sensible, down-to-earth country women, both given to good works and commanding respect in their local community. One reason why Ward's representation of constitutional suffragists appears so sympathetic was her respect for the many respectable and principled suffragists among her family and friends. Crude fictional caricatures of such women would have given offence and were out of the question. Janet Trevelyan, herself a convert to 'the cause', said that in later years her mother 'had many close friends in the Suffrage camp, nor did she ever lose those of her earlier days who were converted'.⁵⁵ In Ward's immediate family circle her sisters Julia and Ethel supported votes for women as did her aunt Frances. Apart from Ward's daughter, Dorothy the 'Arnold-Ward females were sympathizers to a woman'.⁵⁶

Miss Dempsey and Lady Tonville both articulate the case for suffrage while adding their weight to the anti-militant argument not by arguing against votes for women but that the action being taken to secure them is precipitate.

"Suffragist?" says Miss Dempsey. "I should rather think I am. My parents were friends of Mill, and I heard him speak for Woman Suffrage when I was a child. And now, after the years we've toiled and moiled, to see these mad women wrecking the whole thing." (DB, p. 164)

Lady Tonville closely echoes these sentiments:

"Here am I with a house and a daughter, a house-parlourmaid, a boot-boy, and rates to pay. Why shouldn't I vote as well as you? But the difference between me and the Fury is that she wants the vote this year -- this

⁵⁵ Trevelyan, The Life of Mrs Humphry Ward, p. 225.

⁵⁶ Sutherland, Mrs Humphry Ward, p.199.

month – *this minute* – and I don't care whether it comes in my time – or Nora's time – or my grand-children's time. I say we ought to have it – that it is our right – and you men are dolts not to give it us. And I sit and wait peaceably till you do – till the apple is ripe and drops. And meanwhile these wild women prevent its ripening at all. So long as they rage, there it hangs -- out of our reach. So that I'm not only ashamed of them as a woman -- but out of all patience with them as a Suffragist!

(DB, pp. 111-12)

Ward is acutely sensitive to the plight of women whose wrongs are 'real', poverty, hardship, loss of livelihood, physical disability, etc, as opposed to 'imagined', the general oppression of women by men. Two of the 'daughters', a consumptive dressmaker struggling to earn a meagre living because the lady of the manor disapproved of her politics, and a young school teacher unjustly dismissed for being a suffragette, become the recipients of Delia's offers of help, as well as the focus of Ward's hostility to those charged with power and responsibility who abuse their authority. Even Gertrude Marvell's early struggle to better herself in a dismal typewriting office run by a grasping employer and her battles against headaches, sleeplessness, and anaemia are sympathetically depicted.

Towards the end of Delia Blanchflower Ward's thoughtful and open-minded hero, is walking around the streets of London where he chances upon Miss Dempsey returning from a mission to help distressed women. Would the vote help them? Is that why she wants it? he asks. She replies that it would make no difference. Winnington observes a stream of pale and stunted young women pouring out of a factory -- Ward campaigned for factory reform -- 'showing the effects of long hours and poor food' (DB, p.337). In this 'everyday incident of a London street' Winnington is 'aptly reminded of what a man who has his occupation and dwelling amid rural scenes and occupations too readily forgets – that toiling host of women, married and unmarried, which modern industry is every day using, or devouring, or wasting.' (DB, pp.337-338). A gaunt little

procession of the unemployed and starving waving collecting boxes who have come from a strike in Limehouse -- the dockers had gone on a prolonged strike which had much public support in 1911 -- leads him to the following conclusion:

'The vote? What is it actually going to mean, in the struggle for life and happiness that lies before every modern community? How many other social methods and forces have already emerged, and must yet emerge, beside it? The men know it. They are already oppressed with its impotence for the betterment of life. And meanwhile, the women, a section of women -- have seized with the old faith, on the confident cries of sixty years ago!⁵⁷ -- with the same disillusionment waiting in the path!' (DB, pp. 339-40)

The argument here is one that has not hitherto occurred prominently in the novel; the vote has not removed the grievances of industrial workers and is at best an irrelevance. Moreover, it has done little to alleviate the plight of men who pinned their hopes on it in 1832 and the same disappointment lies in wait for women. The use of the present tense of the verb to be in the above quotation is illuminating because by 1915 even Ward had reluctantly acknowledged that the vote (even if it proved to be as ineffective as she predicted) was inevitable and that the inevitable becomes imminent with the passage of time

Was Ward a feminist? As Julia Bush points out, the 'Edwardian women's movement was broad enough to encompass, and indeed to link, middle-class social reformers, aristocratic female imperialists, and equal rights feminists whose priorities lay in the direction of legal and political reform'. Moreover, 'a growing body of historical literature emphasizes the existence and significance of

⁵⁷ This is puzzling because 'sixty years ago' would indicate 1855 which is too late for the Chartist agitations of the 1840s and too early for the agitation which led to the Reform Act of 1866.

the feminist-imperialist link.’⁵⁸ However, to argue that Ward is a feminist is to stretch the word beyond its usually recognised meanings: she had a vested interest in maintaining existing power relationships and their attendant gendered inequalities, although in many other respects she shared much in common with feminists of her day. Beth Sutton-Ramspeck has drawn attention to a contemporary review of Delia Blanchflower by an American, H. W. Boynton, who presumably did not know how Ward stood in relation to votes for women. Boynton interpreted the novel as supportive of non-militant suffrage: “That [Ward] believes in suffrage as opposed to militancy is clear.”⁵⁹ Jane Marcus also suggests that Delia Blanchflower, ‘a novel written by Mrs Ward to expose the iniquities of the suffragettes probably did the Cause more good than harm.’⁶⁰

What is crucial to our understanding of Delia Blanchflower is the separation of ideological position of the writer from the ideological position of the text. Despite the fact that Ward clearly wanted her novel to reinforce the cause of anti-suffragism, Delia Blanchflower is polysemic and can be read in ways which the author would neither recognise nor approve. With its attractive, unrepentant suffragist protagonist, Delia Blanchflower is a ‘New Woman’ novel and may productively be read alongside other such novels with emancipated protagonists, for example, H.G. Wells’ Ann Veronica (1908), the eponymous heroine of which is also a suffragette who has second thoughts about militancy much like Delia.

As Anne Bindselev has put it, Ward was ‘the classic example of the *female* Victorian psyche at war with itself.’⁶¹ In Eve’s Renegades, Valerie Sanders

⁵⁸ Julia Bush (2000) Edwardian Ladies and Imperial Power (Leicester: Leicester University Press), p.178.

⁵⁹ Beth Sutton-Ramspeck, ‘Shot out of the Canon: Mary Ward and the Claims of Conflicting Feminism’, p.215.

⁶⁰ Jane Marcus, The Young Rebecca: Writings of Rebecca West 1911-1917 (London:Macmillan, 1982), p.19.

⁶¹ Anne M. Bindselev (1985) Mrs Humphry Ward: a Study in Late-Victorian Feminine Consciousness and Creative Expression (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell), p. 9.

suggests that Victorian anti-feminist women novelists such as Ward 'may be seen as self-appointed consciences of a confused and anxious society, reflecting in their complex and self-contradictory explorations of women's lives the wavering direction of public opinion as a whole.'⁶² Ward's work has much to say to anyone interested in the women's suffrage debates, although the revival of interest in forgotten Victorian and Edwardian women writers has largely passed her by.

Word count

6900 words

⁶² Sanders, Eve's Renegades, p.204.