... "this day's uproar" exceeds description; the shouts of those who would be heard, and the persevering calls for those who ought to be heard... produced altogether such a vulgar clamour as could never have presented itself to my imagination. And all this in the presence of the "ladies" themselves, several of whom were most untidily arrayed in creased and limp dresses, tumbled and soiled collars, coffee-coloured cambric handkerchiefs, hair anything but neat, and nails which served as hieroglyphics for "unwashen hands". I believe, too, the object of the "fair visitors" is, in part, to waken the ladies of England to a sense of their "rights", and the maintenance of the same. If we are thus to start out of our spheres, who is to take our place? who, as "keepers at home", are to "guide the house", and train up children? Are the gentlemen kindly to officiate for us?

For a brief moment the world of Mrs Josiah Conder had turned upside down. In June 1840 a group of American female delegates presented themselves at the Freemason's Hall in London to participate in the first international anti-slavery conference. Promptly their credentials were rejected by the organizing committee, and amidst the scenes which so perturbed Mrs Conder, the policy of exclusion was firmly maintained. British custom, it was ruled, did not sanction active female participation in public meetings: consequently the American women were banished to the silent obscurity of the gallery. There they remain in B. R. Haydon's famous painting of the opening ceremony, preserved for posterity as diminutive figures in a male dominated scene. Thomas Clarkson, the veteran anti-slavery campaigner, is delivering his peroration surrounded by male delegates from Britain, the United States and other countries;
the sole woman seated amongst the leadership is Mrs Mary Clarkson, shown here dutifully listening to her father-in-law and supervising her young son; on the right-hand side of the foreground another group of women is separated from the men by a vaguely discernible barrier. The ladies, it might seem, had been excluded from a publicly active role in reform movements to an extent that even Mrs Conder must have found reassuring.

Art forms have their own conventions, however, and a careful study of Haydon's painting as an historical source in its own right reveals a much more complex situation than Mrs Conder's outburst would suggest. The artist, who at first sight would seem to have produced something like a plain photographic record of Clarkson addressing his audience, did not simply depict the orator surrounded by a blur of faces. He had been commissioned by the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society to produce one of those composite portraits by means of which that generation commemorated its proudest moments, and in this instance his intention was to create a pictorial hall of fame for the anti-slavery movement at a time when the successful struggle for emancipation in the British West Indies seemed to be developing into a world-wide assertion of Christian philanthropy. Many individuals, including several women, were invited to participate in studio 'sittings' to ensure that they would be immediately identifiable in the painting, and a special catalogue which numbered and named the 'set of heads' was produced to dispel any doubt.¹

To this task of commemoration Haydon contributed an extra dimension by seizing the opportunity to demonstrate his theory that painting should be 'an engine of Religion or State on the minds of the people', and not, the mere portraiture of 'the nobility and the opulent . . . and their beautiful families'.²

¹British Library, Clarkson Papers, Add. MSS 41,267A, ff. 240–51, Description of Haydon's Picture of The Great Meeting of Delegates Held At the Freemason's Tavern, June 1840, For The Abolition of Slavery And The Slave Trade Throughout the World. When the painting was exhibited, it was advertised as having 137 original portraits. See Christian Examiner, And Advocate Of Civil And Religious Liberty (May 1841). An earlier example of this type of mass portraiture is Haydon's Reform Banquet (1832).

²B. R. Haydon, Lectures on Painting and Design (London, 1844), i. 37, 47–9.
Initially he approached his commission with some reluctance, but suddenly he reassessed the scope of his task when he witnessed Clarkson's address and the remarkable emotional response which it evoked from the audience. 'To the reader not present,' he subsequently wrote:

it is scarcely possible to convey without affectation the effect on the imagination of one who, like myself, had never attended benevolent meetings, had no notion of such deep sincerity in any body of men, or of the awful and unaffected piety of the class I had been brought amongst. . . . The women wept—the men shook off their tears, unable to prevent their flowing; for myself, I was so affected and so astonished, that it was many minutes before I recovered, sufficiently to perceive the moment of interest I had longed for had come to pass—and this was the moment I immediately chose for the picture.¹

This impression was deepened when anti-slavery leaders, delegates and guests sat for their portraits, conversed with him about the history of the struggle and left him 'haunted' by their descriptions of the sufferings of the slaves.² The chore quickly developed into a strong personal commitment, and he wrote to Clarkson that he was now intent on making a contribution to the task of eradicating the 'curse' of slavery.³

The painting which emerged therefore was a symbolic statement rather than a faithful record of one session or episode, the 'set of heads' being chosen, positioned and scaled in size partly with the artist's didactic and moral considerations in mind and partly in accordance with the wishes of his patrons. Henry Beckford of Jamaica, for example, was carefully placed beside John Scoble, one of the anti-slavery leaders. 'I determined to place the negro (Beckford) on a level with the abolitionist,' Haydon explained, 'and have done so, and it tells the story at once.'⁴ Fancifully, he gave posthumous recognition to William Wilberforce, Granville Sharpe and Toussaint L'Ouverture by inserting their names on the curtain which formed the back-

¹Description of Haydon's Picture, ff. 245–7.
²Ibid.
ground to the scene, but these were expunged on the instructions of the committee. Guided by the secretary of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, Haydon also ‘ticketted all the heads according to desert’, thereby ensuring, for example, that Sir T. F. Buxton, the leader of another wing of the movement, was given ‘but a second rate place’ in the pictorial setting because he had ‘behaved so bad to the Society’.1

Similar principles guided the inclusion and positioning of women. The painting and its accompanying catalogue make it abundantly clear that the place for most of them was a collective anonymity in the background, but two individuals and a group were singled out for more detailed comment. At one extreme Mary Clarkson, whose portrait is the largest, filled an obvious role as the embodiment of domesticity in a family group: at the other, Lucretia Mott, the best known of the American female delegates, was the only woman to be identified amongst the minuscule figures in the gallery. This was no flattery. Originally intended for the foreground, she had been demoted after Haydon discovered her ‘infidel notions’.2 Between these extremes of domesticity and notoriety, however, is the group of women prominently positioned on the right hand of the foreground. Smaller than the major male portraits, they are larger than many of the others, and they were identified in the catalogue. Amelia Opie, Elizabeth Pease, Anne Knight, Lady Noel Byron and Mary Rawson were being recognized for what they were—philanthropists in their own right.3 Haydon’s painting, therefore, offers the historian a visual contemporary model for an exploration of female roles in early Victorian pressure groups and reform movements. The limitations on the public life of women are made plain, but diverse roles are recognized, and for some women at

1Diary of B. R. Haydon, iv 648, 661; and v 49.
2Ibid. iv. 644.
3Amelia Opie and Lady Byron were included in the chapter on women reformers in H. B. Stanton, Sketches of Reforms and Reformers (New York, 1849). There are brief biographical references to Elizabeth Pease and Anne Knight in Clare Taylor, British and American Abolitionists. An Episode In Transatlantic Understanding (Edinburgh, 1974), pp. 11–12 and 65. For Mary Rawson see below.
least the possibility of active participation in reform movements is affirmed.

These tendencies of the times cause the public to be more disposed than at most former periods to prescribe general rules of conduct, and endeavour to make every one conform to the approved standard.¹

It would be hard to find a better example of John Stuart Mill's famous judgment on his age than the code of customs which limited the participation of respectable women in reform movements during the first sixty years of the nineteenth century. The 1840 anti-slavery convention was untypical only in so far as it was the occasion for an outspoken challenge to the normative behaviour pattern. Thirteen years later, when Harriet Beecher Stowe toured Britain at the height of her fame as the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, there was no recurrence of the dispute. Although large crowds thronged the public meetings that were held in her honour, they came, they saw, but they certainly did not hear the lady, because her husband and her brother spoke on her behalf at meetings such as the one held at Exeter Hall in London and even at the relatively small gatherings which Joseph Sturge assembled to greet her at his own home in Birmingham. A meeting held in her honour at Stafford House on 7 May 1853 demonstrated how this etiquette of public life functioned. There were two parts. During the first, a mixed gathering attended by the Duke of Sutherland and Cabinet ministers, Mrs Stowe's brother delivered an address. Subsequently the ladies retired to a special saloon, where Mrs Stowe spoke in her own right.² A respectable woman, it was obvious, could not address a 'promiscuous assembly'. Reason and Christianity, wrote the Revd J. A. James, a prominent Congregationalist pastoral writer, 'forbid us to hear her gentle voice in the popular assembly; and do not even suffer her to speak in the Church of God'.³

² These meetings are described in the *British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Reporter* (1 June, 1853).
³ *The Works of John Angell James* (London, 1860), iv 78. See also 'A Female's Letter' referring to 'the ground of delicacy, which forbids females to make public speeches', *Temperance Penny Magazine* (April, 1836).
Similar words of caution came even from those parts of the ecclesiastical world where women had been least inhibited from assuming public roles. Retreating from precedents which had been accepted by Wesley himself, the nineteenth century Wesleyans advised women to confine their preaching to their own sex, and, although some of the Methodist secessions continued to make extensive use of female preaching during their early phase of mass revivalism, the practice was abandoned in mid-century. The Society of Friends, it is true, did remain loyal to an 'inner light' ministry by women to such an extent that William Sturge could look back to the 1830s as a time when there was a 'school of prophetesses, possessing great fluency, power, and gift of language', but Thomas Clarkson had been too sanguine when he wrote that the 'public character' of Quaker women marked the commencement of 'a new era in female history'. Both in Britain and the United States the second quarter of the century was an era of schism when all the traditional 'peculiarities' of Quakerism came under severe scrutiny from within. There were uncharacteristically embittered exchanges over charges that the female ministry was unscriptural, and the women themselves were often accused of mystical ranting.

The female ministry survived, and the system of separate meetings through which the women regulated their own business within the framework of the Society continued to ensure that Quakeresses were amongst the few women in early Victorian Britain to receive a training in committee and management skills as their birthright, but Quaker notions of womanhood were frequently set forth in guarded terms. It was well-known, explained

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1 Joseph Ritson, The Romance of Primitive Methodism (London, 1909), ch. VII. Wesleyan conservatism can be seen in Minutes of the Methodist Conference, ii (1803), 188. The decline of female preaching in three Methodist connections (the Wesleyans, the Primitive Methodists and the Bible Christians) is described by H. M. Butler, The 'Pious Sisterhood': A Study of Women's Roles in English Methodism c.1740–c.1840, La Trobe University, BA Thesis (1978).


Joseph John Gurney, the principal spokesman for a Quakerism defined in terms of conventional evangelicalism, that there were 'no women among us, more generally distinguished for modesty, gentleness, order, and a right submission to their brethren, than those who have been called by their divine Master into the exercise of the Christian ministry'.

1 Published extracts from the journals of Gurney's famous sister, Elizabeth Fry, referred to the 'fears and doubts' which she entertained 'as to women's holding Public Meetings', and as her 'voice from the Dead' her daughters cautioned readers of their mother's biography that she did not believe her call to the ministry was general or that it applied to women in other churches. She believed above all that 'a mighty power rested with her own sex' to give special care to the women and children who were outcasts from society. Such a sphere of usefulness would provide an outlet for the 'powers unoccupied, and time unemployed' after domestic priorities had been satisfied.

2 Haydon's painting captured Quakerism at this moment of uncertainty. The Quaker bonnets bore ample testimony to the disproportionate contribution of Quakeresses to public philanthropy, and two of his 'sitters', Anne Knight and Elizabeth Pease, were identified with avant garde notions of women's rights, but Quakers such as Joseph Sturge were members of the committee which had excluded the American female delegates, and their portraits were allocated some of the most prominent positions in the foreground. 3 To such men, Lucretia Mott was not merely a pertinacious woman. She was a Hicksite Quaker, a schismatic, and, as they in all likelihood told Haydon, a woman of 'infidel opinions'.

Serious misgivings and problems had to be overcome before respectable early nineteenth-century women were even allowed


2 Memoir of the Life of Elizabeth Fry, With Extracts from Her Letters and Journal. Edited by Two of Her Daughters (Philadelphia, 1848), ii 293, 550–2.

to attend public meetings. Unsuitable statements might be made in their hearing; there was a risk of chance encounters with unsuitable members of the opposite sex (J. A. James referred to possible dangers even at Sunday School teachers’ meetings); and it was claimed that their presence would promote an atmosphere of levity inimical to business-like procedures.¹ Some societies and institutions simply cut the Gordian Knot, and, like the British Association at its 1836 conference, excluded women from their meetings. Examples of this response can be found in the mid-nineteenth century. Women were not admitted to an anti-Maynooth meeting in Exeter Hall, and at one gathering of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel the few who obtained entry were carefully concealed behind the organ.² Thus, as even a warm sympathizer with the cause of the American women recognized, the anti-slavery convention committee had made a move towards recognizing ‘the rights of women’ by allowing them the ‘privilege of sitting there at all’.³ By then other religious and secular societies were adopting a similarly flexible attitude, and women seem to have occupied a disproportionately large number of seats during the religious anniversary season at Exeter Hall, the rallying ground of evangelical ‘good causes’ after 1831.⁴ At gatherings such as these all but the most fastidious had little to fear: at more evenly balanced ‘promiscuous assemblies’ the proprieties were preserved by segregating the seating, a strategy which had respectable ecclesiastical precedents. The barrier between the men and women in Haydon’s painting was no figment of the artist’s imagination, ‘the upper end and one side’ of the Freemason’s Hall, having been ‘appropriated

⁴J. Ewing Ritchie, Here and There in London (London, 1859), p. 84. Ritchie refers to women occupying nine benches out of ten.
Likewise, in the Birmingham Town Hall, to give one important provincial example, the side galleries were often similarly reserved. At a meeting convened there to oppose the Government’s proposals for raising a militia, it was reported that:

The organ gallery was chiefly occupied by our leading and more philanthropic townsmen; the side galleries were chiefly filled by ladies, amongst whom were many members of the Society of Friends; and the great gallery and floor were crowded chiefly by working-men.²

In this one sentence the journalist had neatly encapsulated a common early Victorian conceptualization of the sexual and social class distinctions in public life.

These notions of public etiquette cast a shadow far beyond the limits of respectable middle class society. Notwithstanding the notoriety they acquired for theorizing about women’s rights, the Owenite Socialists, for example, could be very conventional in the ordering of their society’s business and rituals. During the 1830s they confined committee membership to men, and it was not until 1840 that women were allowed to attend the public dinners in any capacity other than as spectators in the gallery.³

A ‘Female Socialist’ wondered why our social friends should so far follow the priesthood as to preach one thing and practice another. If they really and truly desire to see the females intelligent and useful members of the community, why not establish a rule throughout the branches to have an equal number of females with the males on their councils, and introduce them into their private meetings, and, if they find them ignorant, endeavour to imbue their minds with useful knowledge.⁴

The same reprimand could just as deservedly have been administered to the National Association founded by William Lovett, the Chartist, which proclaimed that ‘woman is in all respects the equal of man’, but in practice denied female members a share in its own government.⁵

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³New Moral World (25 April, 1840).

⁴Ibid. (27 April, 1839).

⁵National Association Gazette (1 January, 1842). This periodical ran for six months, but made no reference to women speakers or committee members.
'WOMAN'S MISSION'

the National Association Hall spoke volumes for a sharp distinction between the public roles of male and female members. On that occasion more than half those present were women; from the chair Mr J. T. Leader called their attention to the education of the rising generation; all the other reported speakers were men; women sang several songs.¹ Admittedly, other Chartists could do better than this—Susanna Inge and Mary Ann Walker of the London Female Charter Association lectured to mixed meetings—but for the most part the women Chartists seem to have played a secondary role.²

II

It would be wrong, however, to proceed to the conclusion that early Victorian women had been dismissed from historical significance in reform movements dominated by a mentality of intransigent masculinity. Haydon's painting is sufficient of a reminder that there are few insights to be gained from a 'Whig Interpretation' of women's history that would depict the first half of the nineteenth century as little more than a Dark Age backdrop to the heroic scenes of later years. The roles assumed by women must be related to the prevalent ideas, techniques and institutions of reform, which, as recent historians have demonstrated, were passing through an important phase in their evolution between 1832 and 1867. D. A. Hamer has described the Victorian pressure group as belonging to a 'political sub-culture, a world which is very different from the political world in which we live today and yet one which was in some respects more democratic, more open to popular participation and influence'.³ Patricia Hollis has referred to the anti-slavery movement, the Anti-Corn Law League and other reform agitations of that era as

¹British Statesman (30 July, 1842).
²Northern Star (5 November and 10 December, 1842). Subsequent to the writing of this paragraph my attention has been drawn to Ms Dorothy Thompson's discussion of working class radical women in Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley (eds.), The Rights and Wrongs of Women (Harmondsworth, 1976), pp. 112–38. Ms Thompson refers to a 'withdrawal from public activity by the women of the working class' during the Chartist era.
contributors to the ‘pressure from without’, a characteristically early Victorian mobilization of public opinion definable as those more or less radical and mainly middle class pressure groups, pursuing specified goals and working for legislative change by putting pressure on parliament and on government; possessing a sophisticated organization over a defined period of time; and invoking a moral language, by claiming to speak for the People, the Nation or the Country.¹

Earlier in the century groups such as these had been accused of usurping a role that properly belonged to parliamentarians: by mid-century they were well on the way to being legitimized as useful adjuncts of a governmental system that was imperfectly attuned to public opinion. It is the thesis of this article that the cultural values which, as we have seen, were so inimical in many respects to the assumption of a public role by women, nonetheless nourished the belief that in a special way women were qualified to invoke a version of this ‘moral language’ of reform, and that as a consequence they too could step on to the national scene as an acknowledged source of public opinion. Some of the nuances of this metamorphosis can be seen in a Morning Chronicle article on the activities of the Anti-Corn Law League’s female supporters:

That, on the one hand, the active participation of women in political agitation and debate is, generally speaking, decidedly undesirable; that on the other hand, there are, from time to time, certain public questions of a quasi-political character on which the expression of female opinion and feeling is both natural and graceful—are safe truisms, on which it were idle to waste a word.²

The ‘truisms’ of bygone ages are less easily disposed of by the historian than by contemporaries, and, before proceeding further, it is necessary to set out the body of beliefs summed up by a term, ‘Woman’s Mission’, which, as Elizabeth Fry’s daughters noted, was ‘almost a word of the day’ on the subject of women’s social obligations.³

There were several variants, but the basic propositions underlying the early Victorian ‘Woman’s Mission’ were as follows. Firstly, there was a heavy emphasis on the distinctive character-

²Quoted in League (12 April, 1845).
³Memoir of Elizabeth Fry, ii 550.
istics and roles of the sexes. Physically and mentally men and women were suited to different tasks in life. Secondly, there was the ascription to women of special qualities (the 'heart') of a domestic and moral nature. Home was their principal sphere. Thirdly, women's finer sensibilities were contrasted with the harsh realities of the non-domestic world. Fourthly, they were invited to play a part in reforming society and expunging its blemishes through their morally uplifting influence on their families and acquaintances. Fifthly, and cautiously (some writers did not proceed to this stage at all), it was affirmed that this influence could also be brought to bear through participation in the work of public societies.¹

Undoubtedly this was a thoroughly mawkish creed, and it is not difficult to understand why Harriet and John Stuart Mill could refer to Victorian women as a 'sort of sentimental priesthood' without full civil and political rights,² but—a consideration which is usually ignored—priestly roles have conferred considerable importance on women in some societies. For example, during the first century AD Tacitus alluded to the high respect paid to Germanic women because they were believed to possess special qualities of holiness and prescience.³ Seventeen hundred years later William Wilberforce offered women 'no mean or ignoble office', because he too saw them as more favourably disposed by nature to religion, in this case to evangelicalism, a religion of the heart:

... we would make them as it were the medium of our intercourse with the heavenly world, the faithful repositories of the religious principle, for the benefit both of the present and of the rising generation.⁴

³Tacitus, Germania, VIII. The original is 'sanctum aliquid et providum'.
⁴William Wilberforce, A Practical View Of thePrevailing Religious System Of Professed Christians, In The Higher And Middle Classes In This Country, Contrasted With Real Christianity (London, n.d.), p. 284. Other references to the
Wilberforce was thinking of the wife and mother withdrawn from 'the bustle of life', and he had serious misgivings about admitting women even to the public meetings of religious societies; but other evangelical writers were more flexible. The Revd J. A. James, for example, overcame his fears about the dangers women faced by participating in religious public life and, in a chapter entitled 'Woman's Mission', beckoned his female readers towards 'the various institutions of our age for the relief of suffering humanity, the instruction of ignorance, and the spread of religion'. As he noted with approval, this was merely to ratify a fait accompli, because women were already 'by far the larger portion' of those who attended public meetings for religious objects.¹

James was commenting on and promoting a phenomenon which has variously been described as 'social feminism' and the 'feminization' of Protestantism—the proliferation of religious and benevolent organizations through which British and American women, at a time when they were denied full civil and employment rights, obtained social recognition outside the home, and in a community of their peers learned how to use business and committee procedures required for such tasks as fund raising and district visiting.² Frequently they assumed a special responsibility towards other women, a role described by the Revd W. Reid as one which opened 'another path to honour and usefulness'


¹James, Works, iv, 77, 135.

and supplied ‘that sad deficiency in so many women’s lives, the want of some specific aim’.¹

This ‘feminization’ of the religious and philanthropic world, it should further be noted, had an inbuilt dynamism derived from the boundless aspirations of nineteenth-century evangelicalism. Bit by bit women were drawn into a wider sphere of public life because of the difficulty of defining ‘religious objects’. Could anti-slavery, for example, come under that heading? The answer appeared in 1825 in the form of an address to the ladies of Great Britain, hailing them as ‘natural labourers’ in the ‘retired fields’ of religious benevolence and urging them to regard the cause of the slave as an extension of their work for the missionaries, the Bible Society and Sunday Schools.² The defilement and destruction of family life on the plantations, cruel punishments and opposition by the slave owners to missionary work became staple themes in the literature circulated amongst women. Reinforcing this sort of appeal was the reiterated theme of sisterhood in which British women were depicted as deliverers of their own sex from the degradation inflicted by slavery.³ Large numbers started to attend the public meetings. ‘It is a singular fact’, wrote Sir George Stephen, ‘that none of our Antislavery meetings were well attended till after it was agreed to admit ladies to be present . . .’, and he commented on the outstanding assistance given by some who accepted a greater commitment.⁴ Frequently referring to this precedent, spokesmen for the temperance and peace societies, and the Anti-Corn Law League were amongst those who likewise welcomed and benefitted from the support of women.⁵ There

¹Revd William Reid, Woman’s Work For Woman’s Weal (Glasgow, 1860), p. 34.
²‘Address To The Ladies of Great Britain, In Behalf Of The Negro-Slaves, Particularly The Females’ in The Humming Bird; Or, Morsels Of Information, On The Subject of Slavery: With Various Miscellaneous Articles (June 1825).
³See, for example, The Female Society for the Relief of Negro Slaves. Album (c.1828) in the Birmingham Public Library. This contains engravings, pamphlets and other printed materials distributed by the anti-slavery women.
⁵See, for example, Third Annual Report of the British and Foreign Temperance Society (London, 1834), p. 114; Herald of Peace (October–December, 1823); Manchester Guardian (1 December, 1841); Birmingham Journal (1 September, 1838); National Association Gazette (5 February, 1842).
were misgivings and divided opinions, but the outcome was that by the end of the 1840s 'Woman's Mission' had been defined as the right and duty to share in a variety of campaigns against moral, social and political unrighteousness.

The nature of the change is indicated by a comparison with previous practice. 'In the years 1790–1830', a historian has recently observed, 'the voice of liberal or radical women was rarely heard except in the most latitudinarian charities. . . . The women who worked for the expanding charities were, for the most part, conservative. . . .' By 1830, however, philanthropy itself was changing. The religious and benevolent society in which Nonconformists provided support while the leadership and offices of prestige were conferred overwhelmingly on Anglican MPs, peers, bishops and military men was not the only available model. A new mood, the mood which produced the Voluntary movement and the anti-church rate campaigns of the 1830s, signalled the growth of Nonconformist assertiveness in the provinces, divided philanthropic movements and contributed to the emergence of more militant pressure groups. The trend was shown by the creation of the Agency Anti-Slavery Committee in 1831, which drew heavily on the support of Nonconformists and set out to whip up provincial opinion in favour of total and immediate abolition. From this wing of the anti-slavery movement came the men who led the campaign against the apprenticeship system in the West Indies and organized the 1840 convention. Socially, politically and ecclesiastically they were outside and even hostile to the 'Establishment'. In Sir George Stephen's words they were 'new people', and, as Haydon discovered in 1840, they wished neither to invoke the memory of Wilberforce nor to give his successor, Buxton, anything higher than a 'second-rate place'. Through a series of overlapping memberships they either controlled or exerted a powerful influence on the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, the peace and temperance movements, the Anti-Corn Law League and a number of other associations contributing to the 'pressure from without'.

2 Stephen, Anti-Slavery Recollections, pp. 127–213. Joseph Sturge of Birming-
radical and mainly Nonconformist pressure groups drew extensively on female commitment and support.

III

Many thousands of women contributed to the 'pressure from without' merely by attending meetings: others contributed more actively. Much could be done by dedicated individuals even if they did not venture beyond the domestic circle. As the Peace Society explained in one of its appeals for support, the 'retiring and unobtrusive character' of the female sex did not 'prohibit them from employing their literary talents in the exposure and condemnation of practices which are subversive of the social and domestic virtues'.  

1 Amelia Opie, whom Haydon singled out for a position of prominence in his painting, was one such woman. Retiring or not, wives, daughters and other relatives seem often to have joined in the public agitations favoured by a dynamic head of the household. For Eliza Cropper, who acted as secretary to her father and travelled with him on his many philanthropic journeys, involvement was total. Anti-slavery, she wrote to one of her friends, was 'the continual subject of conversation with us'.  

2 Soon afterwards she married Joseph Sturge, one of the most prominent abolitionists. For Lawrence Heyworth of Liverpool, it was a matter of pride that he had made it [corn law repeal] the general topic of his conversation and never ceased to talk of it; there was not a domestic in his household who did not do

ham is the best-known example of the interlocking directorate which controlled these movements. See Alex. Tyrrell, 'Making the Millennium: The Mid-Nineteenth Century Peace Movement', Historical Journal (March 1978), pp. 84–5.

1 Introduction to An Examination Of The Principles Which Are Considered to Support The Practice of War, by a Lady, tract no. viii of the Society for the Promotion of Permanent and Universal Peace (London, 1835). This was first published in 1823.

the same; and he had an only daughter, (Applause) he had an only daughter, who took an equal interest in the question, and whose greatest delight was to distribute tracts on the subject among the poor, by whom she was received with open arms. (Applause)

Miss Heyworth’s Pardiggle-like activities indicate how strong was the tendency to build on precedents, institutions and practices—in this case district visiting—of proven value in the public world of religious benevolence, and indeed it would have been difficult to do otherwise. Not only were many of the voluntary societies controlled by interlocking directorates, but, as Elihu Burritt noted, the sort of women who volunteered their services to the ‘pressure from without’ were already ‘well trained to benevolent enterprises’. This pattern of adaptation can be seen strikingly exemplified in four pressure groups—the anti-slavery movement, the Anti-Corn Law League (the two pacesetters), and the peace and temperance movements.

The anti-slavery leaders had the easiest task. Their crusade being so close to the evangelical heart, they could simply establish auxiliary associations in exactly the same way as the missionary and Bible societies had done. Composed only of women, auxiliaries complied with the contemporary objection to female participation in ‘promiscuous assemblies’, and their value was undoubted. ‘Associations formed and conducted by our Christian sisters’, the Baptist Missionary Society reported in 1820, ‘have always been the most productive in proportion to their extent’. By 1840 their usefulness to the anti-slavery movement could be gauged by the frank admission of the recently founded British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society that, although it wished to see a male as well as a female society formed wherever possible, the latter was ‘on some accounts, the more valuable of the two’.

The records of some of these auxiliaries show them functioning in many respects like other benevolent societies of the day. The

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1 Anti-Bread Tax Circular (19 May, 1842).
2 New Britain Public Library, Connecticut, Elihu Burritt Papers, MS Journal, 7 March, 1851.
4 British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Reporter (15 January, 1840).
earliest, the 'Female Society for Birmingham, West Bromwich, Wednesbury, Walsall and their Respective Neighbourhoods, for the relief of British Negro Slaves' was founded on 8 April 1825 by two women—Mary Lloyd, a Quaker minister, and Lucy Townsend, wife of the Vicar of West Bromwich—on the model of the Bible, provident and benevolent associations of the district. Their mission was defined as being to assist female slaves; to diffuse knowledge on slavery; to send financial support to missionaries who were conducting schools and caring for abandoned slaves; and to appeal to the planters. Work bags full of anti-slavery pamphlets were prepared by the members and sold to raise money, some of which went to augment the funds of the London society.  

Between 1826 and 1831 the number of similar auxiliaries in the Anti-Slavery Society's subscription list rose from four to thirty-nine, and in 1831 they remitted £536. 4s. 3d. out of a total of £3,399. 17s. 3d. During the 1830s in the struggle against colonial slavery and the apprenticeship system the women's auxiliaries made an important contribution to the finances of the anti-slavery movement, and subsequently, during the 1840s and 1850s several of them assisted the American abolitionists. In 1853, when Harriet Beecher Stowe visited Britain, the Birmingham Ladies' Negro Friend Society co-ordinated the national collection of the Uncle Tom Penny Offering in a bid to gain publicity and money by asking British readers of Mrs Stowe's best-seller to contribute to a fund which she could spend on anti-slavery objectives of her choice.

More controversially, the domestic and moral values attributed to early nineteenth century womanhood were assimilated to two

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1 The activities of the Birmingham society are described in the Minute Book of the Ladies Society for the Relief of Negro Slaves; the Ledger Belonging To The Female Society For The Relief of British Negro Slaves for Birmingham, West Bromwich, etc.; and Female Society for the Relief of Negro Slaves. Album. All these are held in the Birmingham Public Library. See also Annual Monitor (1866), pp. 72–6, and Sara W. Sturge, Memoir of Mary Lloyd of Wednesbury, 1795–1865 (n.p., 1921), pp. 30–1.

2 Anti-Slavery Society Reports and Accounts, 1824–1832.

3 See, for example, Dr Williams's Library, Estlin Collection, 24,120, Minute Book. Bristol and Clifton Auxiliary Ladies Anti-Slavery Society, 8 April, 1852.

4 British Friend (1 December, 1852).
of the most public forms of anti-slavery 'pressure from without'—
the commercial boycott and the mass petition. As household
managers who presumably disbursed much of the family budget,
women, not men, seemed to bear the responsibility for cutting
down the demand for the products of slavery. Taking the free
produce movement as one of their special responsibilities, the
Birmingham and Sheffield female auxiliaries visited every house in
their respective cities between 1826 and 1829 pledging people to
use only free labour sugar, and later the women abolitionists
took the major part in promoting the sale of substitutes for slave
produced cotton. At various stages during the 1840s and 1850s
Anna Richardson, a Newcastle Quakeress, edited the Slave, the
organ of the Free Labour Association; Bessie Inglis managed the
London Free Labour Depot; and women's committees (drawing
heavily on the support of Quakeresses) provided a national net-
work of customers and helpers. The women's Olive Leaf Circles
described below also participated in the work. In 1826 Wilber-
force urged that this sort of female direct action should not be
reported in the columns of the Anti-Slavery Reporter, and he was
just as 'uncomfortable' about the involvement of women in
petitioning, because it would take them outside their appropriate
sphere of 'private discourse and hoc genus omne'. Other counsels
prevailed—Zachary Macaulay, for example, disagreed with
Wilberforce—and the anti-slavery women went on to petition
parliament in their own right. By the early 1830s the mass petition
of women describing their righteous indignation over the sinful-

1See, for example, the rules dated 12/7/25 in Minute Book of Auxiliary Society
for the Relief of Negro Slaves. Instituted at Sheffield 21st of 6th mo. 1825, John
Rylands University Library of Manchester, Rylands English MS 743; and Extract
of letter from Thomas Clarkson to Lucy Townsend, August 1825, Rylands
English MS 741 (20).
2Quarterly Meeting Report, 26/1/29, Minute Book of the [Birmingham]
Ladies Society For The Relief of Negro Slaves. See also entries for 9 January, 3
February, 20 March, and 10 July, 1827 in Minute Book of Auxiliary Society for the
Relief of Negro Slaves. Instituted at Sheffield, 21st of 6th mo. 1825.
3Elihu Burritt Papers, MS Journal, 24 November, 1854. See also British and
Foreign Anti-Slavery Reporter (1 June, 1852), and British Friend (1 July, 1853).
4Viscountess Knutsford, Life and Letters of Zachary Macaulay (London, 1900),
p. 433. See also R. I. and S. Wilberforce (eds.), The Correspondence of William
Wilberforce (London, 1840), ii 494 and 501.
ness of slavery and its effects on their own sex was evolving into an important medium for expressing the moral language of the ‘pressure from without’. At the height of the agitation for the Emancipation Act of 1833 the London Female Anti-Slavery Society appealed for ‘one vast and universal expression of feeling from all the females of the United Kingdom’ as a means of giving ‘more weight’ to the campaign. The accession of a female sovereign in 1837 provided another justification for taking women’s opinions to the highest authorities in the land, and in what must have been a major achievement of organization the anti-slavery women of Scotland and England recommended total and immediate emancipation to Queen Victoria in an address which was proudly described as containing 588,083 signatures on rolls stretching 11,453 feet. This strategy passed into anti-slavery lore as ‘the final blow to slavery in the West Indies’.

Unlike the anti-slavery movement, the Anti-Corn Law League had no women’s auxiliaries. This omission sprang neither from any ignorance of the benefits to be obtained from affiliated societies—male working-class sympathizers were enrolled in operative anti-corn law associations—nor from any disinclination to make use of women’s assistance. The difficulty, as Thomas Milner Gibson pointed out in 1841, was that a campaign for the removal of protectionist agricultural tariffs was not immediately identifiable as a ladies’ cause.

And yet the League was eventually transformed into an outstanding example of the Victorian middle-class movement complete with bazaars which were conducted and supported by

1 Institute of Jamaica, MST 321, f. 8, Petition sent by the London Female Anti-Slavery Society, 29 April, 1833.
4 Manchester Public Library, Wilson Papers, Thomas Milner Gibson to George Wilson, 29 October, 1841.
thousands of women. There can have been few more convincing demonstrations of the surefootedness with which the League's leaders traversed the social culture of that era than the skill they deployed in adapting 'Woman's Mission' to their own purposes.

From the beginning women were admitted to the League's public meetings, and step by step their involvement was increased in ways sanctioned by religious and philanthropic custom. Tea parties, a form of public social intercourse which was growing in popularity especially amongst the Nonconformists during the 1840s, were sponsored with the specific intention of making repeal a family matter. The services of George Thompson, an established favourite with the anti-slavery ladies, were obtained for lectures, and with his help the League soon presented itself in public as the legitimate successor of the anti-slavery campaigns of the 1830s. 'Behold a work before you,' Thompson told the women of Manchester in 1841,

in all respects as appropriate and equally imperative. Deliver, I beseech you, the families around you from the grasp of famine. Take up the cause of suffering womanhood and helpless innocence. . . .

The outcome was a ladies' committee to superintend the signing and submission of a memorial to the Queen extolling the moral and humanitarian benefits of free trade in food. During that winter the same women raised over 100,000 signatures in a house to house petitioning canvass. Inevitably, given what one publication described as the 'notorious' efficiency of ladies as collectors for good causes, their assistance was sought for the revenue-raising campaigns that were so great a feature of the League's year by year activity. A ladies' committee helped to raise the 'Great Fund', and, most significant of all, bazaars were organized.

1Anti-Bread-Tax Circular (23 September, 1841). See also B.L., Sturge Papers, Add. MSS 50,131, ff. 72-3, Richard Cobden to Joseph Sturge, 1841 (exact date unknown). Tea-drinking as a 'predominantly dissenting social function' is discussed by Brian Harrison, Drink and the Victorians (London, 1971), p. 302.
2Manchester Guardian (1 December, 1841). Thompson's services were obtained as a result of an alliance between the League and the British India Society. Anti-Bread-Tax Circular (16 June, 1841).
3Manchester Guardian (1 December, 1841).
4League (4 July, 1846).
5Anti-Bread-Tax Circular (24 January, 1843).
Historians have often pointed to the handsome revenues which were raised at two of these bazaars—£10,000 in 1842, a sum greater than the previous year's total revenue, and £25,000 in 1845—but the number of women involved was no less impressive. In April 1845 it was reported that the League was being assisted by the largest bazaar committee ever created with 1,150 ladies on the aggregate committee and an even larger number serving on an extensive network of local committees.

By publicly boasting of the extensive support which it received from its female sympathizers the League was doing much more than drawing attention to their fund-raising and supportive tasks. 'Womanhood' was highly charged with symbolic values in Victorian society, and, as the Anti-Bread-Tax Circular made clear when referring to the 1842 Manchester bazaar, there were important, albeit intangible, benefits conferred on any pressure group which was accepted as a ladies' cause:

We are, we most willingly confess, anxious that this demonstration should exhibit the widespread sympathy of our countrywomen in the cause which it is our privilege to advocate—not for the sake of the great pecuniary aid which it will undoubtedly yield, so much as from the gratification we shall derive from the knowledge that the females of England have thrown their irresistible influence into the scale of justice to the bread-taxed people. We are not unconscious of the mighty impulse that will be given to the corn-law agitation, when the women of Britain take up our question, and rescue it from the baneful taint of party. Sanctioned by the ministers of religion, and the wives and mothers of the kingdom, no merely political party will dare to array itself against us.

This cannot be dismissed as empty rhetoric. The last sentence shows how the commonplace notions of 'Woman's Mission' were being translated into a version of the moral language spoken by movements which formed part of the 'pressure from without' during this era. Much was at stake. In one sense the Anti-Corn Law League was a political party with its own electoral machinery, and a long term strategy which focused on the general election expected to be held in 1848, but, at a time when hostile traditional interests were entrenched in political life, much of its strength

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1 Manchester Public Library, J. B. Smith Papers, Corn Laws, vol. i. J. Shuttleworth to J. B. Smith, 19 February, 1842. See also League (21 June, 1845).
2 League (5 April, 1845).
3 Anti-Bread-Tax Circular (2 December 1841).
had to come from the mobilization of extra-parliamentary pressure. League spokesmen, therefore, assiduously courted the support of the religious public which was already accustomed to intervene in affairs of state on high moral grounds.

The summoning of large gatherings of Nonconformist clergymen to denounce the Corn Laws was one part of this search for religious and philanthropic status—overtures, some successful, were also made to prominent members of the anti-slavery, peace and temperance movements—but what has escaped notice by historians is the way in which the League's 'fair philanthropists' served the same ends. While continuing to proclaim themselves second to none as champions of the domestic virtues, anti-corn law spokesmen triumphantly demonstrated that the very doubts which were voiced about the public activities of their female sympathizers could be put to good use as a means of winning early Victorian hearts and minds. Far from throwing off the woman (George Thompson's phrase), these highly respectable ladies, it was emphasized, had been drawn reluctantly from their domestic duties by a call of the heart, religion and benevolence to help put down evils and injustices which threatened that very domesticity itself. Existing religious and philanthropic institutions, it was argued, were helpless in the face of the current economic depression which had been inflicted on the nation by a parliament indifferent to all but the short-sighted self-interest of the great landowners. In these circumstances 'woman's mission and woman's work' could be nothing less than the 'liberation of industry from the landlord yoke, and of bread from the landlord tax'. It was 'a question of home'. For the League, therefore, the support it received from women was a measure of moral stature:

1 'We shall be able to get up such a demonstration as will establish us in the ranks of the religious bodies—give us access to their chapels & associations & sanction the public co-operation of the women', B.L., Cobden Papers, Add. MSS 43,662, ff. 30–4, Richard Cobden to C. P. Villiers [July 1841].
3 Manchester Guardian (1 December 1841).
4 League (1 March 1845).
women's sympathies turned economic theories and policy proposals into religious and moral imperatives.

In these circumstances League leaders could not accept the criticism voiced by some contemporaries and historians that they had made a mistake in admitting 'luxurious products of laborious idleness' from the ladies to what could otherwise have been Britain's first national industrial exhibition. The word 'bazaar' was so firmly associated in the public mind with women's philanthropy that the holding of one was a highly effective way of identifying a campaign for reform as a ladies' cause. The League's first effort, the Anti-Bread-Tax Circular reported in 1842, had been 'to make their question known and understood; their next was to make it a religious as well as a moral question, their crowning effort has been to make it Woman's question'. There were many such references, and they were part of a carefully nurtured reputation which stood the leadership in good stead. When Cobden was accused of complicity in the Plug Plot disorders which swept over the industrial districts in 1842 he could reply in a speech referring to those 'ministers of religion, those ladies, and that numerous body of the moral and religious portion of the middle classes of this country who have lent us their assistance'. Two years later George Wilson seems to have experienced no inhibitions in publicly planning the League's London bazaar as if it were an offshoot of the religious anniversary meetings which customarily took place in the month of May. The successful outcome of the bazaar left Cobden rejoicing in the prospect of seeing the League established on 'the same high moral position as far above party, as was the anti-slavery party [sic] in its palmiest days'. This was a remarkable achievement for a movement which had been far from respectable in the early years, when its supporters received violence and meted it out; when they used the language of class hatred against the aristocracy; and when they were associated with activities that were often described as seditious.

Two other movements—those for peace and temperance—further illustrate the widening role of women during the 1840s

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1 Art Union (1 July 1845).  
2 Anti-Bread-Tax Circular (10 February 1842).  
3 Ibid. (8 September 1842).  
4 League (22 February 1845).  
5 J. B. Smith Papers, no. 441, Richard Cobden to J. B. Smith, 23 May 1845.
and 1850s. The London Peace Society issued appeals for women's assistance as early as 1823, but little success was recorded until the 1840s, when Elihu Burritt founded the Bond of Brotherhood and adopted a more vigorously radical strategy drawing on the precedents of the anti-slavery movement and the Anti-Corn Law League. Women were enrolled in the Olive Leaf Circles, a parallel network of British and American female societies which had a membership in Britain of 3,000 during the early 1850s. The 'learned blacksmith' from Connecticut, Burritt, appears in his private writings and in contemporary accounts as an unmarried 'ladies man', wistfully spending a disproportionate amount of his time amongst impeccably respectable women whose status was far superior to his own, and a quality of maudlin sentimentality always pervaded the ethos of the Olive Leaf Circles. But the Bond of Brotherhood was an active Anglo-American pressure group which helped to launch the Peace Congress movement of the late 1840s as a venture in what was described at the time as 'people-diplomacy', an attempt to by-pass governments by rallying public opinion in support of policies based on international arbitration and disarmament. Between 1848 and 1851 a series of well publicized congresses at Brussels, Paris, Frankfort and London brought together the 'friends of peace' from several countries in Europe and America. Women were not allowed to participate in these congresses as delegates, but Burritt devolved other public tasks on them. They assumed responsibility for inserting Olive Leaves (short articles on peace) in foreign periodicals; they sent 'friendly international addresses' overseas at times when war threatened; they raised petitions, and they held international bazaars. By such means, it was claimed, they were demonstrating that 'the sympathy and activities of the Women' could establish 'new and powerful ties... binding the different countries of the

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1 Herald of Peace (October–December 1823 and August 1836).
2 Friends' House Library, Elihu Burritt MS Box 8.5 (22), The Olive Leaf Circles, Their Constitution and Operations (n.d.).
4 See Tyrrell, 'Making the Millennium', passim.
world in relations of mutual friendship and alliance.\(^1\) In this statement the values expressed were those associated with home, family and religion, but they were being extended to define a ‘mission’ which would give women a direct influence on the conduct of international relations.

From its early days in the 1830s the temperance movement, too, showed an active interest in winning female support. The overlapping membership of many pressure groups and the ready transference of strategies between them have already been mentioned, but there were special reasons for the designation of temperance as a ‘ladies cause’. Nineteenth century temperance reformers contrasted an idealized vision of home and family with the public house—the ‘masculine republic’—which claimed women and children as its neglected, abused and prostituted victims.\(^2\) The forms of sociability which they devised as alternatives relied heavily on the presence of women and, to some extent, even of children. Tea parties, soirées, festivals, processions and excursions formed important parts of the temperance calendar and indeed were frequently timed to coincide with and provide rival attractions to wakes, fairs and other recreations traditionally associated with heavy drinking.\(^3\) An observer at one of the tea parties organized by the Birmingham Temperance Society commented favourably on ‘the appearance of so many clean, well-dressed, and orderly mechanics, and their wives and children, enjoying themselves with the utmost spirits and good humour...’\(^4\). According to Joseph Livesey, tea parties such as this necessarily embodied ‘the influence and companionship of females’, and he saw them as agents of a social change which would drive ‘the intoxicating cup from respectable companies’.\(^5\) At public dinners and other meetings where intoxicants were

\(^1\)British Friend (1 April 1850). See also Harriet Beecher Stowe, Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands (London, 1854), pp. 182–3.


\(^3\)For example, an annual ‘Temperance Entertainment’ was held at Street ‘to counteract... the demoralizing influence and effects of a fair and revel’, British and Foreign Temperance Advocate (1834).

\(^4\)Birmingham Journal (2 January 1841).

\(^5\)Livesey’s Moral Reformer (13 January 1838).
consumed, on the other hand, women seem often to have been excluded or confined to a gallery as onlookers.1

Women sometimes joined the ordinary membership of the early temperance societies, and female auxiliaries also came into existence. The author of a prize essay saw them as the most assiduous of the movement's workers in 1847. They were the 'collectors, donors, tract-distributors, pledge-gatherers, in the local societies, beside, in many instances, carrying vigorously forward branches formed exclusively for their own sex'.2 In May 1853 a national Ladies Temperance Association was set up to coordinate these activities.3 Confined to what the Bolton auxiliary was told were 'spheres of usefulness ... appropriate to the station and usefulness of woman', the female societies performed much of the drudgery of temperance work, but reports indicate that the movement could also accommodate women working 'altogether independently' of the men. The Birmingham auxiliary which had 'managed its own affairs, elected its own officers, and chosen its own work...' was offered as a model.4 Another 'model', the Leeds Ladies Temperance Association, carried out a plan of district visiting, lecturing and tract distribution 'with a particular reference to their own sex'.5 Here again the theme of sisterhood was important, and some of the women's societies even attempted to bend marriage customs to their purposes by pledging their single members to reject proposals from non-teetotallers.6 A few women acquired a reputation for their work on behalf of temperance, but the movement was less flexible in the scope it offered individuals. The career of Ann Jane Carlile exemplifies the mixture of limitations and opportunities encountered by a woman

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1 At one of the Anti-Corn Law League's meetings 'the nature of the entertainment (Wine, Cake and Fruit) excluded the Ladies'. Wilson Papers, M. 20, [I] McCallum to Mrs George Wilson, 16 January 1843.

2 D. G. Paine, 'Total Abstinence From Strong Drinks Important to Female Honor and Happiness' in Teetotal Essayist; Or Monthly Temperance Standard (15 March 1847).

3 National Temperance Chronicle (July 1854).

4 Temperance Reporter, And Organ Of The Birmingham And Midland Counties Temperance Societies (October 1854).

5 National Temperance Chronicle (October 1856).

6 Leicestershire Total Abstinence Record (2 December 1837). See also Preston Temperance Advocate, Supplement (April 1836).
who aspired to play a public role in the movement. Having given some public lectures to mixed audiences and stirred up a controversy for doing so, she specialized in addressing groups of women and children. The early Band of Hope owed much to her efforts.¹

IV

The symbolic and practical value of women in the ‘pressure from without’ is incontestable: their sphere of activity was avowedly both separate and unequal. The possibility exists therefore that this ‘Woman’s Mission’ was merely another variant of an attitude which has been described as ‘reaction tactfully phrased’.² If the Preston example was at all representative, the reaction would seem to have been more in evidence than the tactful phrasing when the Anti-Corn Law bazaar committees were set up. After ‘an hour or two had been spent in the best of enjoyment and fellowship, the gentlemen present assembled round a platform, for the transaction of the more immediate business of the meeting’, and a series of resolutions was passed without one woman being reported as speaking.³ Likewise, in the anti-slavery movement the Birmingham and Bristol records describe auxiliaries which functioned in some respects as appendages of a male abolitionist—Joseph Sturge and J. B. Estlin—with his female relatives playing a conspicuous part.⁴ Public statements issued by some of these women’s societies could be deferentially self-effacing. The Glasgow Ladies Auxiliary Emancipation Society, for example, defended itself against the charge that anti-slavery was an unfeminine activity by pointing to the flogging and moral pollution of female slaves, and pledging support to ‘stronger

³Preston Guardian (15 February 1845). The records of the League make it clear that George Wilson, the secretary, regarded the bazaars as his own ‘pet object’, and that the ladies committees had a very limited role (West Sussex Record Office, Cobden 66, John Bright to Richard Cobden, 21 October 1842).
⁴See, for example, Estlin Collection, 24.120, Minute Book. Bristol and Clifton Auxiliary Ladies Anti-Slavery Society, 5 July 1855.
minds' such as that of George Thompson. The 'history of Mr Thompson's mission', was 'to a great extent, the history of this Society . . .'.

'Reaction', however, seems scarcely appropriate as a term for these roles at a time when man-pleasing accomplishments, 'HOME', and conservative forms of religious and humanitarian endeavour produced more narrowly circumscribed norms of womanhood. A Quaker periodical, the Friend, rebuked the Anti-Corn Law League for violating female propriety by placing young women at its bazaar stalls, and The Times was even less restrained in denouncing the 'political prostitution' of 'the petticoat politicians of Manchester'. Contrasting Mrs Cobden and other League women with 'the retiring ladies who prefer their nurseries and prayer-books to the pleasures and wages of political libertinism', The Times decreed that to 'make a woman a politician is to make her a monster'. In these circumstances the League was certainly entitled to congratulate its women supporters for leading the way in 'a new path of female beneficence'. By contemporary standards they were in the forefront of public opinion.

The extent of the change that was taking place was often concealed by the circumspect language employed to describe it. Even in a private letter to the wife of the League's secretary, an Anti-Corn Law Leaguer could not dispense with an introduction hoping that a discussion of political economy would not be 'altogether uncongenial' to her feminine feelings now that she and other Manchester women had taken up the cause of repeal. But a change it undoubtedly was, as the Leaguer ultimately made clear. Once the introductory ritual of recognizing his correspondent's femininity was performed, he turned his letter into an uncompromisingly technical discussion of the case for repeal. The point is

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1 Three Years' Female Anti-Slavery Effort, In Britain and America: Being A Report Of The Proceedings of the Glasgow Ladies Auxiliary Emancipation Society, Since Its Formation in January, 1834: Containing A Sketch Of The Rise and Progress Of the American Female Anti-Slavery Societies; And Valuable Communications Addressed By Them, Both To Societies And Individuals In This Country (Glasgow, 1837).

2 Friend (6 June 1845); The Times (1 January 1842).

3 League (31 May 1845).

4 Wilson Papers, M20, [?] McCallum to Mrs George Wilson, 16 January 1843.
worth dwelling on, because many women must have obtained some sort of political education and commitment from the public meetings and other activities to which they were increasingly admitted. At a time when it could still be argued in the *Edinburgh Review* that they should continue to be excluded from the House of Commons debates, because they would hear subjects offensive to 'that nice sense of decorum which now prevails in refined society', women were being encouraged to attend controversial meetings such as those held in Birmingham by the anti-corn law, complete suffrage, peace and temperance associations.¹ Some anti-slavery female auxiliaries had libraries; they circulated letters from the leaders of the movement; and in several of the pressure groups women were responsible for much of the door-to-door publicity.² More spectacularly, towards the end of the period discussed in this article the Ladies Olive Leaf Circles and Peace auxiliaries placarded cities with anti-war material at the height of the public hysteria engendered by the Indian Mutiny.³

Nor should it be assumed, as is often done with reference to the voting pattern of newly enfranchised women in the twentieth century, that this extension of the public role of women was a force for conservatism. Paradoxically, the moral language of 'Woman's Mission' not only conferred respectability on early Victorian reform movements and pressure groups, but also reinforced the inflexibility and extremism of policy evident in so many of them. This was a consequence of the original justification for the entry of women into this form of public life—the call of religion and morality with which there could be no compromise. Richard Cobden recognized the force of this argument when he referred to the total and immediate repeal of the corn laws as 'the only principle which secures the support of Christian

¹*Edinburgh Review* (April 1841), p. 206. For reports of women's presence at various meetings see Birmingham Journal (22 January and 18 June 1842) and Pilot (1 March and 20 December 1845).

²See, for example, Rylands Eng. MS 742 (32) and (47), Letters to Mrs Mary Anne Rawson; Rylands Eng. MS 743, 10 April 1832, Minute Book of [Sheffield] Auxiliary Society.

³Herald of Peace (1 June 1858).
Ministers, and the women of England'. Compromise policies, on the other hand, would associate them with that other stereotyped figure of the era, the ‘trading politician’, whose life was given over to the bartering of principle for short-term gains.

It was no mere coincidence that the opening of the anti-slavery movement to women was almost exactly contemporaneous with the rise of those whom Sir George Stephen described as the abolitionist ‘storming party’. Excluded from the public platform, the women were forcefully articulate in other ways. The first important attack on the meliorist tactics adopted by Wilberforce and Buxton was made in 1824 by a Quakeress, Elizabeth Heyrick, in a polemical pamphlet where she described gradual abolition as a scheme of Satan to dull Christian consciences and accused the leadership of converting ‘the great business of emancipation into an object of political calculation’ on which God could not bestow his patronage. The correct course, she believed, was to adopt direct action against the planters in the form of an organized boycott of slave-produced sugar, a strategy which implicitly envisaged a radical re-definition of sexual roles in the anti-slavery movement. Henceforward the battle would have been fought, not in the masculine preserves of parliament, but in households and over shop counters where women could exert a decisive influence. Putting action to words, Elizabeth Heyrick personally carried out a free produce canvass of much of Leicester.

The very similar canvasses which were carried out in Sheffield and Birmingham point to the adoption of this form of immediatism by the emerging women’s anti-slavery auxiliary societies of the 1820s. Within a few months of its initiation in July 1825 the Sheffield auxiliary deleted the word ‘amelioration’ from its constitution and pledged itself to ‘promote, so far as may be in our power, the extinction of Slavery throughout the British do-

1 West Sussex Record Office, Cobden 44, Richard Cobden to John Bright, 20 January 1842.
2 Stephen, Anti-Slavery Recollections, p. 245.
3 Anon. [Elizabeth Heyrick], Immediate Not Gradual Abolition; Or, An Inquiry Into The Shortest, Safest And Most Effectual Means of Getting Rid of West Indian Slavery (London, 1824).
minions'. The Birmingham auxiliary even tried to use the power of the purse by making its annual grant to the London society conditional on a declaration in favour of immediatism. Subsequently, when the movement divided, and the Agency Anti-Slavery Society attempted to rouse the provinces in support of total and immediate emancipation, women played an important part. Out of seventeen anti-slavery societies cited in the Agency subscription list, thirteen were women's auxiliaries, and out of a total income of £1,657. 8s. 6d. women as groups and individuals remitted £548. 8s. 6d. Their militancy at this time is further indicated in a remarkably outspoken letter which was written by Anne Knight. Pouring scorn on those whom she called the 'daddies', men such as T. F. Buxton and Zachary Macaulay, she emphasized how important the women's support was for the emerging radical wing of the movement:

mark the young valiants in 1830 going out as agents to address the people from north to south by lectures demanding immediate and unconditional emancipation & procuring petitions these wake up doings very much disturbed the slumber of the daddies who not only as emancipation apostles refused them pecuniary aid but opposed them with might and main. Lucy Townsend first sent out her agents from her society at West Bromwich & our Chelmsford sent a grant to the daddy society for the agency department while as yet there were no agents.

Written to encourage Abby Kelly, one of the delegates excluded from the 1840 convention, this letter was an expression of the bond of sympathy between some British and American female abolitionists. The British anti-slavery movement split again in the 1840s, and several of the women's auxiliaries—those in Bristol,
Edinburgh, Glasgow and Dublin seem to have been the most prominent—established very close ties with Lloyd Garrison, the principal American spokesman for equal participation of the sexes in anti-slavery activities. Letters and visitors kept the bitter memories of 1840 fresh.  

'Throughout Garrisonianism', however, is an inadequate term for what was taking place. An important stage had been reached in the development of 'Woman's Mission' from religious inspired humanitarianism into the 'pressure from without' and from there to a heightening of self-confidence on the part of some at least of the women who participated. An interesting exchange of opinion between the men's and women's societies in Sheffield indicates what had been happening behind the scenes as early as 1838 in an auxiliary which had been founded 'to take the humble laborious part of the work' and leave to the men 'the more public movement'. When the men ignored the women's suggestion for future action and interfered with their proceedings, Mary Anne Rawson (another of Haydon's portraits) sent a stinging letter proclaiming that, unless the women received an apology, they would henceforward act as if the men did not exist. Meeting regularly as a segregated group, this auxiliary had obviously become what one historian has described as a 'supportive community' for women within which 'independence and self-definition' could evolve.

The extent of the difference between British and American women's participation in pressure group politics during this era has certainly been exaggerated. Angelina Grimké and other prominent American female abolitionists acknowledged that they were following in the footsteps of the British women during the late 1830s, and, as the exclusion of female delegates from the New York World's Temperance Convention in 1853 indicates, similar opposition stood in the way of an enhanced female con-

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2 Rylands Eng. MS 742 (63), Resolutions of the Ladies Committee of the Universal Abolition Society, 13 March 1838, and letter (copy) from Mary Anne Rawson to the Men's Committee (n.d.).


tribution to the 'pressure from without' in both countries. There was no British equivalent of the Seneca Falls declaration of women's rights, but the word of the 1840 anti-slavery convention committee was not accepted as final in either country. Anne Knight's letters to her transatlantic correspondents during the early 1840s give no indication that British women were falling behind their American sisters in re-evaluating their position in society. She claimed to speak for women who, having been schooled in the ways of visiting committees and religious societies, had gone at the behest of Clarkson himself into the forefront of the anti-slavery battle 'to fight with beasts at Ephesus'. As a consequence they had often discussed the equality of the sexes. Anne Knight subsequently helped to launch the first British women's suffrage group, and she was reported as lecturing publicly on women's rights 'with a good deal of zeal' at peace and temperance gatherings.

Her attempt at attending the 1851 peace congress as a delegate was rebuffed, but the strategy of frontal assault triumphed soon afterwards in the anti-slavery movement. In 1854, when the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society convened a conference to reconcile the various factions, two female delegates were appointed by the Manchester society, and they were allowed to take their seats. There were various indications that less explicitly feminist tactics were starting to yield similar results during the same decade. A woman obtained permission to give temperance lectures in the Birmingham Town Hall in 1859, and the

1 Angelina E. Crimké, *Slavery In America* (Edinburgh, 1837), p. 32. See also The Whole World's Temperance Convention Held at Metropolitan Hall In The City Of New York On Thursday and Friday, Sept. 1st and 2nd, 1853 (New York, 1853), p. 6. The excluded women, who belonged to Lloyd Garrison's circle, responded by summoning 'The Whole World's Temperance Convention'.


4 Estlin Collection, Minute Book. Bristol and Clifton Auxiliary Ladies Anti-Slavery Society, 16 November, 24 November, 7 December 1854. See also Empire (27 January 1855).
temperance press carried a favourable report. The example of Mary Carpenter is better known. When she organized a conference on juvenile criminals in 1851 she remained silent in public, because, according to her brother, she believed that if she ‘lifted up her voice in an assembly of gentlemen’, this would have been ‘tantamount to unsexing herself’. By 1857, however, several years service in the early juvenile reformatories had earned her a reputation as a ‘weighty’ representative of ‘an opinion that was rapidly gaining ground’, and she addressed a session of the distinguished National Association for the Promotion of Social Science. No less a person than Lord John Russell welcomed the ‘new influence’ which was giving women ‘a portion in the formation and moulding of public opinion’. The female public speaker had still to proceed circumspectly—in 1870 a public address by Josephine Butler was preceded by a speech in which her clergyman husband described the ‘unusual circumstances’ which allowed women ‘to take a lead’—but it was undoubtedly significant for the further evolution of sexual roles in the ‘pressure from without’ when Bessie Inglis, one of the organizers of the free produce movement, took ‘Woman’s Mission’ as the theme for a public lecture and was praised in the Bond of Brotherhood for doing so.

‘Heart’, ‘home’, and ‘influence’ were key words expressive of the attitudes to womanhood which pervaded the pressure groups described in this article. These words could be used to enjoin a life amidst the luxuriant thickets of sentimentality in John Ruskin’s ‘Queens’ Gardens’, but the ‘Mission’ discussed above was an active and evolving role within which the conven-

1 Temperance Monthly Visitor (April 1859).
2 Carpenter, The Life and Work of Mary Carpenter, pp. 157–8, 201. See also English Woman’s Journal (1 September and 1 November 1858), and Transactions Of The National Association For The Promotion Of Social Science, 1857. Inaugural Addresses And Select Papers (London, 1858), pp. xv–xvi, 226. The general committee included Lords Brougham and Shaftesbury, the Bishop of London, W. E. Gladstone, John Ruskin and J. S. Mill.
3 Shield (28 March 1870). The Revd Butler invoked the precedents of Elizabeth Fry, Florence Nightingale and even Joan of Arc.
4 Bond of Brotherhood (April 1858).
tions of public life were widened. Individually and in association women were becoming autonomous contributors to public opinion at the very time when public opinion itself was being accepted as a legitimate adjunct of national policy-making. 'Woman's Mission', in the blunt words of a temperance spokesman, was a useful 'term of power' for the men who conducted movements for moral reform:1 over the years it had also been transformed into an ideology and strategy which women themselves could deploy in public life. Looking back from 1854 at the 'lessons' of the previous fifty years, Mrs C. L. Balfour, a prominent temperance writer, discerned a slow but steady extension of 'the sphere of woman's operations' and attributed this to 'the faculty of ''self-help'' energy and perseverance' called forth by the performance of a social mission which involved no confrontation with the 'prescriptive rights' of men. For Mrs Balfour every public problem had its domestic side which properly belonged to women, especially when the problems affected women themselves.2 Here was a line of reasoning which led straight into the world of politics, as the conservative MP, Sir Eardley Wilmot, recognized in accepting a petition from Mary Anne Rawson:

> Your sex are [sic] happily excluded, by the usage of the world, from political contention & warfare. But if there ever was a case, which justified and demanded the interference of your sex, it is the present: when the female apprentices have been treated, with a barbarity & savageness, revolting to every principle of humanity.3

Wilmot was trying to restrict his concession to the concluding stages of the anti-slavery campaign in 1838, but, as the histories of the pressure groups referred to in this article indicate, there

1National Temperance Advocate (1849).
2Clara Lucas Balfour, Working Women Of The Last Half Century: The Lesson Of Their Lives (London, 1854), pp. 2–12. Mrs Balfour's 'lessons' were drawn from the lives of Mrs Trimmer, Hannah More, Mrs Barbauld, Elizabeth Smith, Charlotte Elizabeth, Mrs Sherman, Mrs Mary L. Duncan, Sarah Martin, Mrs Ann H. Judson and Hannah Kilham. Elizabeth Fry was excluded because her life was too well known. The book contains favourable references to Mary Carpenter, Caroline Chisholm, Lydia Child and H. B. Stowe.
3Rylands Eng. MS 741 (127), Sir Eardley Wilmot to Mary Anne Rawson, 21 May [1838?].
were to be many other moments when the usage was waived by those who accepted the assistance of 'The Universal Sister'.