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Review of Women of the Press in Nineteenth-Century Britain

Barbara Onslow

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Barbara Onslow, *Women of the Press in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Macmillan Press, 2000). pp. xii + 297. £45.00. ISBN 0 333 68378 1.

'Everything in the literary world is done by favour and connections'. Mary Howitt's assessment of the importance of contacts in the London of the 1840s is borne out in Barbara Onslow's wide ranging and fascinating study of nineteenth century women journalists. 'Journalism was an open profession', as she observes, 'but it was a masculine one' and women who sought access to it relied on a variety of networks. Her book is, indirectly, a superb study of female networking. Family connections helped women like Mary Howitt, Anna Maria Hall, Isabella Beeton and Alice Meynell, each of whom teamed up with her husband in publishing a journal, but in doing so ran the risk of remaining in the shadow of her more illustrious spouse. Siblings and parents could be valuable, as Geraldine Jewsbury found with her elder sister Maria Jane, and Anna Hall with her mother. Older literary women like Anna Jameson and Eliza Lynn Linton proved generous patrons to young aspirants. There were also a number of influential female circles, one centring on Mrs Samuel Carter Hall's (Anna Maria) 'at homes', another on George Eliot's Sunday afternoons at The Priory, and salons run by the Duchess of Sutherland, and earlier by the Countess of Blessington. Religious denominations, many of them in provincial towns, provided social and intellectual networks from which women in particular benefited, and families like the Yonges, the Mozleys and the Gaskells became the focus of influential feminine circles. Later the Langham Place group of feminists generated a number of networks as did various suffrage societies.

But as journalism became more professionalized women's lack of formal education and their restricted participation in public life became significant, and, Onslow argues, the expansion and democratization of the press militated against women. The cosy world of family connections and patronage seemed light years away from the climate of the 'new journalism', with its more pressurized working conditions, aggressive advertising, and competition. Onslow draws on a variety of self-help manuals and articles directed at the would-be woman journalist of the nineties, offering advice on how to secure work in the new era. Amateurism had created its own anxieties earlier in the century. The new professionalism, implicit in the creation of the Society of Women Journalists in 1893, and the opening of the Institute of Journalists and the Society of Authors to women, did not reduce those anxieties.

Before the advent of regular columns and by-lines, the editorship of a journal, with its status and secure income, was a much sought after, and for women, an elusive prize. As Onslow demonstrates, women were barred from editorships of the high profile reviews and organs of opinion. She writes perceptively about Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Ellen Wood as editors of *Belgravia* and the *Argosy*, and of a number of other successful women editors, notably the formidable Christian Johnston of *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, Eliza Cook, and the women editors of religious periodicals, Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna of the *Christian Lady's Magazine*, and Charlotte Yonge with her long-lived *Monthly Packet*.

In a chapter entitled 'Handmaids and Decorators' Onslow highlights the numbers of unsung and unacknowledged press women who acted as sub-editors, assistant editors, readers, mes-

sengers and even composers. Of these George Eliot's role as John Chapman's sub-editor at the *Westminster* is undoubtedly the most celebrated. Onslow shows how doggedly she stuck to her tasks, berating Chapman for haphazard commissioning, laboriously rewriting overlength articles, pressing for new contributors to cover areas like art criticism, and constantly watching the review's competitors. She was both strategist and dogsbody, fuming at typographical errors at one moment, and urging Chapman to think through the composition of future numbers in the next. As has often been observed, she was editor in all but name, and without the power which the title could confer. Taking the long view of Eliot's period as a journalist Onslow suggests that rather than hackwork undertaken to meet the bills and readily abandoned in order to devote herself to the 'serious' art of fiction, her journalism was a vital apprenticeship, providing the foundations for her later creativity:

Spending a Saturday afternoon reading a bundle of material on taxation, with the interruption of a request for a quick opinion on a thick German tome, or undertaking what even Chapman termed 'the laborious and difficult' task of reducing a 100-page article on prison discipline to a third of its length was hardly congenial. But judicious cutting and pruning exercised her linguistic skills, and her heavy eclectic reading programme formed the intellectual groundwork of her novels.

Moreover it was Eliot's confidence as an editor which enabled her, as an apprentice novelist, to confront John Blackwood, to defend the 'darker touches' in her work and as she put it to him, to see her stories, 'in some degree from your point of view as well as my own' (p.210).

Onslow is more at home in the world of the newspaper press at the end of the century than with the reviews and magazines of the earlier decades. Her discussion of women reviewers is uneven, and to be fair, the amount of material is daunting. But in a chapter entitled 'Journalism and the Novelist' she writes effectively of the creative intersection of the roles of novelist and reviewer, with reference to Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, Margaret Oliphant and Eliza Lynn Linton. As she indicates earlier in the book, 'the resultant interplay of their own fiction with their critical assessments of fellow novelists and contemporary literary trends, created an animated cultural arena in which writing was practised, promoted and debated' (p.66).

Eliot is undoubtedly the best known woman journalist of the mid-century, the one 'woman of the press' who did not remain invisible. Barbara Onslow's study demonstrates just how unexceptional she was. One of the strengths of the book is the attention it pays to these 'invisible' women – over a hundred are given brief biographical sketches. To comparatively well known names like Harriet Martineau, Frances Power Cobbe, Mary Russell Mitford, Oliphant and Lynn Linton the book adds to our knowledge of Frances Low, Mary Margaret Busk, Elisabeth Hasell, Hannah Lawrance, Edith Simcox, Mrs. C. E. Humphry, and Flora Shaw, together with the contributors to juvenile papers, sectarian reviews, women's magazines and other 'niche market' publications.

She is resistant to arguments about gendered space in the periodical press, the view that cer-

tain subjects, notably politics, economics, science and philosophy were embargoed to women, and that when journalists like Harriet Martineau, Frances Power Cobbe or Mary Somerville tackled these subjects they were assumed to be presenting themselves in the intermediary or secondary role of publicists or explicators rather than practitioners. She is resistant, too, to constructing a meliorist narrative. Looking back towards the end of her long career with *Blackwood's* Margaret Oliphant reflected that the magazine continued to welcome articles 'from many a manly pen' and from all corners of the Empire, adding, 'she has her ladies, too but shall we own it? perhaps loves them less'. Onslow strikes a similarly rueful note in her autobiographical 'Afterword' when writing about her own career as a journalist in the 1950s. 'Women of the Press' it would seem, remain the 'fifth estate'.

I have one quibble with this richly informative book – its system of referencing. The chapters are densely annotated and the interested reader is naturally drawn to the author's extensive source materials. The endnotes, upwards of ninety per chapter, are part footnote, and part short references, some of them quirkily constructed, which in turn require further elucidation in the Select Bibliography. The interested reader quickly becomes an irritated one.

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