



Fairfield University
DigitalCommons@Fairfield

History Faculty Publications

History Department

Winter 1997

"Selected Letters of Leslie Stephen. Vol. 1, 1864-1882" by John W. Bicknell; Leslie Stephen; and "Selected Letters of Leslie Stephen. Vol. 2, 1882-1904" by John W. Bicknell; Leslie Stephen.

Jeffrey P. von Arx S.J.
Fairfield University, president@fairfield.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/history-facultypubs>

© 1997 by the North American Conference on British Studies.

Peer Reviewed

Repository Citation

von Arx, Jeffrey P. S.J., ""Selected Letters of Leslie Stephen. Vol. 1, 1864-1882" by John W. Bicknell; Leslie Stephen; and "Selected Letters of Leslie Stephen. Vol. 2, 1882-1904" by John W. Bicknell; Leslie Stephen." (1997). *History Faculty Publications*. 22.

<https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/history-facultypubs/22>

Published Citation

von Arx S.J., Jeffrey P., "Selected Letters of Leslie Stephen. Vol. 1, 1864-1882" by John W. Bicknell; Leslie Stephen; and "Selected Letters of Leslie Stephen. Vol. 2, 1882-1904" by John W. Bicknell; Leslie Stephen. *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Winter, 1997), pp. 709-711.

This item has been accepted for inclusion in DigitalCommons@Fairfield by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Fairfield. It is brought to you by DigitalCommons@Fairfield with permission from the rights-holder(s) and is protected by copyright and/or related rights. You are free to use this item in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses, you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@fairfield.edu.

Gladstonian political style, and John Shaw, on the historical construction of the Scots crofters as a victim community, clearly advance the book's objective.

The others treat a hodgepodge of aspects of radical politics, from the women's franchise question to Celtic nationalism. Of these, three essays stand out. Anthony Howe's shrewd analysis of the Edwardian reorientation of free trade ideology, away from its Ricardian and evangelical roots toward issues of welfare and democracy, helps explain the curious persistence of Cobdenite dogma in twentieth-century Britain. (It says little for the coherence of the collection, however, that Frank Trentmann's directly following essay, on the *death* of free trade, is completely oblivious to Howe's revisionist argument. Such divergent views in the same book ought at least to engage each other at some level.) Jonathan Spain's essay on the nineteenth-century debate over cattle disease and government protection measures, clearly inspired by the recent Mad Cow controversy, takes up a somewhat neglected issue that refocused the political debate over free trade and the agricultural interest in the 1870s. And Richard Lewis contributes a nice paper on the decisive shift of Welsh radical tradition away from its original targets of choice, landlords and Anglican clergy, to interwar villains, coal mine owners, and mine managers—creating a liberal (not Marxist) bridge in South Wales between the old radicalism and the new socialism.

With the exception of a couple of lazy essayists who rehash or catalog the familiar, most contributors at least perform the service that one expects of this kind of collection—they give useful glimpses of work being done. This is a service, however, that is best done as soon as possible after a conference. A three-year wait is not exceptional these days, but it does run the risk of staleness. With regard to the collection's larger, stated objective, one comes away with the sense that the sum of these essays falls short of substantially confirming Biagini's reiterated thesis (quoting Martin Pugh) that British politics "was not primarily about the individual's rights, but the representation of his community" (p. 1).

Tufts University

H. L. MALCHOW

John W. Bicknell, ed. *Selected Letters of Leslie Stephen*. Vol. 1, 1864–1882. Columbus: Ohio State University Press. 1996. Pp. xxi, 284. \$60.00. ISBN 0-8142-0690-5.

John W. Bicknell, ed. *Selected Letters of Leslie Stephen*. Vol. 2, 1882–1904. Columbus: Ohio State University Press. 1996. Pp. xiii, 570. \$65.00. ISBN 0-8142-0691-3.

Leslie Stephen is the quintessential Victorian man of letters, and these two volumes edited by John W. Bicknell give new meaning to that term. Readers of F. W. Maitland's *Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen* (1906) have long known that Stephen conducted an extensive correspondence that is an excellent source for his life and times, but the letters cited in Maitland inevitably were incomplete and selected to illustrate the man's public life. Many of these letters find their way into Bicknell's collection, but are now complete and joined by letters never before published, including many letters to members of his family. These more personal letters are important because they show a side of Stephen not seen before, and they are an essential complement, even a corrective, to the inevitably idiosyncratic portrait of Stephen as Mr. Ramsey in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and in her autobiographical *Moments of Being*.

The editing of these volumes is superb. Bicknell is acknowledged by no less a figure than Noel Annan, author of the definitive biography of Stephen (*Leslie Stephen: The Godless*

Victorian [1984]) to be the doyen of Stephen studies. Until now, however, most of Bicknell's expertise has been available only to the small number of students of Stephen who have been fortunate enough to benefit from Bicknell's generous advice and assistance. In these volumes, his erudition is offered to all. The footnotes are a treasure trove for students of late Victorian intellectual life. There were only two instances I discovered where Bicknell's encyclopedic knowledge of the period might have offered more. A note (1: 145, n. 9) identifying the Marquess of Ripon, whom Stephen calls a fool in an October 1874 letter, does not give the reason for this opinion—which was Ripon's notorious conversion to Catholicism the month before. An intriguing letter to his second wife, Julia Prinsep Stephen (2: 412), recounts an evening spent in Davos with J. A. Symonds and two young Swiss of the latter's acquaintance in which Stephen's discomfort in the company is palpable. Surely Symonds' homosexuality was relevant to mention in the accompanying note.

The most extensive and extended correspondence, interestingly enough, is with three Americans: James Russell Lowell, Charles Eliot Norton, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., whom Stephen had met on his several visits to the United States. Although many of these letters were published by Maitland, the opportunity to read what must be nearly the whole run of the correspondence is invaluable. In his efforts to keep his transatlantic correspondents informed, Stephen offered a running commentary on political events in England, his estimations of most of the important intellectual figures of the day, and the evolution of his own opinions. The first of these letters, to Lowell, is dated 1864, and the last, to Norton, was written in November 1903, three months before Stephen's death.

I suspect that the greatest interest in this correspondence, however, given the tremendous contemporary engrossment with Virginia Woolf, will come from those who seek the true identity of Mr. Ramsey. Here there is a balance and a nuance offered to his daughter's portrayal by many letters now published for the first time. Stephen was clearly deeply solicitous of his second wife, Julia Prinsep, Virginia's mother, and the reader has the sense that, if anything, Stephen tried to restrain her from an almost compulsive tendency to overextend herself in the care and nursing of her numerous family. There is deep self-knowledge revealed in Stephen's observations on his own behavior, whether in his realization of the effect that his moods could have on his family or in his awareness that he could become obsessed with small or insignificant things. Surely this self-knowledge must have mitigated the self-preoccupation that is the impression readers have of Stephen from what is assumed to be a portrait of him in *To the Lighthouse*.

Bicknell provides introductions and chronologies through the volumes to the various phases of Stephen's life and helpful biographical sketches of his principal correspondents. The introductions are for the most part straightforward narrative, but they certainly do not conceal an admiration for his subject, even as they are honest about his personal shortcomings. One of Stephen's most popular, and certainly most representative, works was entitled *Essays on Freethinking and Plainspeaking*, and clearly, Leslie Stephen in this persona has attracted Bicknell's life-long interest. It need hardly be said that we are far from a hermeneutics of suspicion here. If, after the mid-twentieth century rehabilitation of Victorian worthies that Bicknell's generation has achieved, readers seek a post-modern critique of the sometimes annoying certainty of Stephen that everything was self-evident, they had better look elsewhere. An edition of letters is not an intellectual biography, but the essential

ambivalence of a strain of Victorian intellectual life that combined intellectual certainty with a deep cultural pessimism is not an object of Bicknell's curiosity.

Georgetown University

JEFFREY VON ARX

Karen Hunt. *Equivocal Feminists: The Social Democratic Federation and the Woman Question, 1884–1911*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 1996. Pp. xiii, 296. \$54.95. ISBN 0-521-55451-9.

The relationship between the women's movements and labor and socialist organizations in Britain around the turn of this century has been treated in a number of recent studies. Karen Hunt fills a remaining notable gap with her case study of the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), the Marxist wing of the British socialist movement, and its views on the position of women. In an impressive forensic exercise in political pathology, she dissects the theoretical inheritance, ideological leanings, and political policies and practices with regard to women's issues of this most masculinist of organizations. In so doing, she usefully reminds us that the SDF included figures, such as Dora Montefiore and Herbert Burrows, who sought to ensure more serious consideration of the Woman Question, in contest with some of the better-known vocal misogynists among its leadership, such as Belfort Bax.

While SDF policies and practices tended, for the most part, to follow the Second International's orthodoxy, there was room for dissent and debate, especially on issues relating to women. Hunt argues that such heterogeneity of views was possible because of weaknesses in Marxist theory concerning the position of women, especially as elaborated by Engels and Bebel. She concludes, like a number of other commentators before her, that the theoretical legacy of Marxism was deeply ambiguous, subsuming sex differences under those of class and serving to define the Woman Question as simultaneously part of but marginal to the socialist project. As a consequence, the claims of the "bourgeois" women's movement were dismissed as reflecting purely sectional interests that might threaten the class solidarity essential to achieving socialism.

In addition, Bax, as a leading Marxist ethicist, argued successfully that issues that did not immediately pertain to the economic relations between classes should remain a matter of individual conscience. Hence, the SDF formally adopted a stand of supposed neutrality on a range of issues raised by the women's movement, most notably, the family, marriage, and free love. On other issues it was clearly masculinist in its general outlook, for example, in its disregard of women's need for equal opportunities in the labor market and in its rejection of demands for an equal franchise for women. Its leadership was ambivalent, too, about following Clara Zetkin's example in establishing an autonomous women's wing within the equivalent German party. Hunt shows that there were always vocal dissidents, such as Montefiore and Burrows, prepared to uphold women's fight for independence and autonomy. But she also demonstrates that such figures did not have the same access to the SDF press, nor were they ever so high in its organizational hierarchy as clearly misogynist polemicists such as Bax. Similarly, the efforts of Montefiore and other SDF women to establish separate women's groups within their organization depended to a significant extent on the goodwill of the male members in any one local branch. Moreover, as these struggles began to meet with a degree of success, the women's groups were brought back under the control of the central (and almost entirely male) leadership.