

## **Beyond Suffrage: feminism, education and the politics of class in the inter-war years**

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Happiness, a much more fundamental conception than mere enjoyment or pleasure, depends upon the existence of life and liberty, but it cannot be pursued by the individual unless he has had a chance to develop, first as a child, and then as an adult, all his interests and faculties, varied as they are between each member of society. I do not for a moment suggest that we are even yet in sight of that goal, but that it must be our “guiding light” has been my belief for the forty years that I have been a member of the Education Committee (Simon, 1964).

These were the closing words of octogenarian Lady Shena Simon, accepting the Honorary Freedom of the City of Manchester conferred upon her in 1964. Compared with the larger body of people, Simon occupied a rarefied world. R.H. Tawney, Labour’s leading educational philosopher in the interwar years, was a family friend as were many leading figures in public and political life, particularly in Fabian socialism. From a distinctly privileged background, educated at Newnham College and the London School of Economics, she was not allowed to take a degree since Cambridge withheld full membership of the university from women until 1948. Maintaining traditions of largely unpaid and voluntary service in 1912 she married the wealthy Mancunian social reformer and Liberal industrialist Ernest Simon. Her commitment to feminism and education never wavered though in time she would move from the radical fringe of the Liberals to join the Labour Party (Martin, 2004). This article uses group biography to look at the part played by socialists and feminists in the politics of London education through the inter-war years. Years which fall into what Olive Banks (1981) refers to as ‘the intermission’ in discussing what happened to feminism as an ideology and the feminists who participated in the suffrage campaigns before the movement was reborn anew in the 1960s. London was chosen because of the conspicuous strength of women in metropolitan politics, both in terms of the numbers involved and the scope and power accorded them. My subjects are: siblings Hugh Franklin (1889-1962) and Helen Bentwich (née Franklin, 1892-1972), Agnes Dawson (1873-1953), Barbara Drake (née Meinertzhagen, 1876-1963), Susan Lawrence (1871-1947), and Eveline Lowe (née Farren, 1869-1956).

In his classic essay on generations, Karl Mannheim (1997) emphasised that members of any one generation can only participate in a temporally limited section of the historical-social process. The individuals profiled here are similarly located in terms of their common experience in history. They belong to the same social generation and were influenced by contact with the accumulated heritage of the suffrage period. For Dawson and Franklin in particular, the militant face of the Edwardian suffrage movement provided the subjective experience that shaped their political beliefs and campaigns. They participated in feminism as it began to approach a mass movement and later, as did the others, in pressure group policies. For Olive Banks (1981) ‘old’ and ‘new’ feminism were (and are) one single historical process. Like her, I use a structure of sequential generations to place the feminists in their social context. Like

her, I use the concept of feminist in the broadest possible way, granting the title to those individuals and groups who have tried to change the position of women, or the ideas about women. Banks' sample of 'first-wave' feminists consists of four birth cohorts designated to illuminate the link between generation and social change. Taking each in turn, cohort one consists of those born before 1828, cohort two of those born between 1828 and 1848, those in the third cohort were born between 1849 and 1871 and those in cohort four between 1872 and 1891. This group represents the last generation of 'first-wave' feminism and it includes Dawson, Drake, Franklin and Lawrence. Lowe forms part of cohort two, while the birth date of Bentwich is just outside cohort four. In examining the part played by feminists in the development of London education this article forms part of a recent trend making a more inclusive education history sensitive to the operation of gender. It employs life history to place the feminists in their social context, to understand the appeal of feminism and socialism and the contemporary relevance of their ideas. Touching on the notion of party intellectuals, it raises questions about what might inhibit an identity as an intellectual and how this relates to our historical and cultural understanding of what an intellectual actually is. The linkage between scholarship and political actions will be examined through the debate over secondary education. All the educator activists featured here became a political force. There is evidence that they were participants in the making of a metropolitan political elite emerging from the association between feminism, socialism and the labour and trade union movement.

By intellectuals I mean those in the Labour Party who were striving to be the carriers of conviction. In *Absent Minds* (2006, pp 46-48) Stefan Collini charts the semantic field around the concept of 'the intellectual' ranging from the late nineteenth century to the present. Collini distinguishes three main senses of the noun commonly used in English – the sociological, the subjective and the cultural. The sociological sense refers to a socio-professional category and will tend to include such occupations as 'teachers' and 'journalists'. The subjective sense 'focuses upon an individual's attitude to and degree of interest in ideas' and the cultural sense upon those who qualify for the label because they are deemed to possess some kind of 'cultural authority'. Primarily I use the term intellectual in the sociological and cultural senses, tied up with the attempt to intervene in or act upon the political sphere. I work outside the social and cultural distinctions the traditional British class structure has always drawn between workers and thinkers: outside also the organising ideas of gender that exclude women from intellectual life. For example, to illustrate this in a British context, we have the testimony of Olive Banks (1996) captured in her account of her experiences as an academic sociologist, as student, teacher and researcher between 1947 and the early 1990s. Olive showed the neglect of gender in the discipline itself, besides the lack of sympathy for women's rights and women's issues amongst male sociologists. Ellen Condliffe Lagemann describes the making of a woman intellectual worker in a US context. Graduating from Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts in 1967, she found it difficult to square her intellectual aspirations with the fact that she was a woman. Exploring the struggles undergone by a generational layer of past women 'who had self-consciously and painfully become effective, autonomous, public women' (1997, p. 162) enabled her to become a scholar, to be herself. Though Collini hesitates over the usefulness of Pierre Bourdieu's (1998) economic metaphor of 'cultural capital' to reflect the traits at the heart of intellectual authority, it appears to me that his conception of the *habitus* is useful in that it focuses attention on ways of seeing and being within the world. Bound up with issues of power and

learned more by experience than by teaching, *habitus* is defined as social practice linked to, for example, linguistic competence, lifestyle, politics and prestige, combined with particular dispositions, attitudes and tastes. The concept is central to Bourdieu's understanding of the social world as made up of different but overlapping 'fields of power' which function according to their own tacit logic or set of rules. Acceptance as a legitimate player of the game within a specific field of action is achieved by access to different types of capital – economic, social, cultural and symbolic. If and when the capital(s) are accepted as legitimate they take the form of symbolic capital. When it comes to the making of a party intellectual, atypical actors like women, will need more exceptional qualities because of the need to compensate for the gender bias in the operation of a larger *field* of intellectual force.

My preference is to use Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci's suggestions, relating to hegemony and the role of civil society, in attempting to understand the function of the intellectual. In choosing to emphasise their strategic role for the analysis of struggles over meaning, Gramsci argues that marginalised social and cultural groups retain the capacity to produce a counter hegemony or world view that might modify, negotiate, resist or even overthrow the dominant culture. Hence the importance of organic intellectuals, who emerge with the formation of new economic classes 'as functioning to elaborate ideologies, to educate the people, to unify social forces, and to secure hegemony' for the social class to which they are linked' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 334). While the working-class is capable of producing its own organic intellectuals, the function of the political party is 'that of channelling the activity of these organic intellectuals and providing a link between the class and certain sections of the traditional intelligentsia'. This is not to deny, as Jane Miller (1996, p. 128) notes, Gramsci's failure to think of women as 'potential agents (except inadvertently) in the processes of change and renewal' or to address those gender dimensions that would constrain the capacity of women to be transformative intellectuals. To place the political and social thinking that exercised great influence in context I start with the single case of Eveline Lowe. Showing also the effect of the city on its inhabitants and the way in which it often works as an active influence. Building on the work of Kate Rousmaniere (2003) on the 'lessons' she believed Chicago taught her subject, Margaret Haley, I will map exposure to ideas and associations with sensitivity to London as a distinctive socio-cultural, psycho-social environment.

### **The Expression of Active Citizenship**

Eveline Lowe was the eldest of seven children born in Rotherhithe on the south side of the river Thames. In her childhood, organised Christian religion provided a framework for her religious, social and cultural life. Educated at a boarding school for the daughters of Congregational ministers, she attended Homerton teacher training college and had a brief spell of teaching in schools before returning to the college to lecture. In 1901 she was promoted to vice-principal, having supervised the college's relocation to Cambridge, a position she held until she left to marry George Lowe. The newly weds settled in the London borough of Bermondsey where their neighbours were members of the working class in steady employment, a few had live-in servants. Congregationalists were evangelical in their approach, there was an insistence on the obligation to do good works and the Lowe's played an active role in the development of cultural institutions (*The Times*, 31 May 1956).

Bermondsey was deemed needy since neither the localities labelled slums nor the cultures of their inhabitants had received the same level of attention as the dissolute residuum of London's East End. George was President of the Bermondsey Adult School and helper at the philanthropic settlement house established there in 1898 with the support of Leys School, Cambridge, a Wesleyan institution, and nonconformist professors and students at the university. Eveline organised single-sex evening classes for women, a Settlement Reading Circle and the Old Homertonian Association. In the inter-war years Homerton students were intensely involved as youth workers in girls' clubs, play schemes and vacation schools; giving rise to what Carol Dyhouse (1995, p. 223) suggests we call a 'feminine subculture' on the periphery of college life. In 1928, Eveline established a London Study Group to discuss educational and social problems. It seems likely that for her, like Shena Simon, a life subordinated to the well-being of the state, was *the* means of self-realisation. This moral imperative was apparent in the place held by the 'Religion of Humanity' devised by Auguste Comte and espoused the English positivists (attracted by the possibility of an ethical substitute for traditional Christianity). Constituted through ideas of positive social action, its appeal meshed and intermeshed with notions of 'active citizenship' that found expression in popular as well as academic studies. For instance, the anti-suffragist Mary Ward's best-selling novel *Robert Elsmere* (first published in 1888) took up this theme as its hero found peace and satisfaction living amongst the poor. Dedicated to the memory of the philosopher T.H. Green (a Fellow of Balliol College Oxford at the time of his early death in 1882), striving for the common good played a central role in Green's idealism. Education should develop the ideal to be good in each individual, so that 'each has the capacity to develop moral character and moral sense and that this will ultimately be part of a common endeavour within which each will play his or her part' (Plant, 2006, p. 29).

Eveline Lowe was elected a guardian responsible for the administration of poor relief (in 1905) and a founder member of Bermondsey Women's Labour League (in 1906). During the Bermondsey uprising in 1911 when, inspired by the all-London walk-out by dockers, thousands of workers came out on strike she organised strike relief. The settlement provided mutual support, friendship and opportunities for meeting socially and politically with like-minded people, notably Ada and Alfred Salter, co-founders of Bermondsey Independent Labour Party (in 1908). Both couples belong squarely with the earnest minority for whom socialism was both moral vocation and political practice. Dedicated to and/or 'colonising' a specific slum community, Alfred rejected a promising research career for medical practice among the Bermondsey poor and Ada worked as a settler. Qualifying as a medical practitioner in 1911, George Lowe subsequently worked as a partner in Salter's surgery. When Labour won Bermondsey council (in 1919) the friends mused about the changes they might make. Eveline's wish list included a bathroom in every house, nursery schools for the under-fives, garden-playgrounds, school meals for hungry children and the Red Flag flying over London's County Hall (Brockway, 1995, p. 33). But euphoria turned to grief when George died of a septic throat contracted from a patient. Becoming a widow was a turning point. At the age of fifty Eveline accepted the offer of a co-opted place on the Education Committee of the London County Council (LCC) and in 1922 she became a city councillor. Three years later Ada was her running mate and the two women represented Bermondsey for sixteen years.

The LCC Education Committee was the most singularly visible of all English local education authorities. Nearness to Fleet Street and national television meant that political actions occurred under the close scrutiny of changing administrations in the central government and were reported on by the media. Its physical location within the capital had repercussions upon the politicians themselves. The acrimonious disputes between central and local government involving the educational work of its forerunner, the London School Board, were not forgotten. But Lowe had a long and effective career on the LCC. To begin with she was a staunch supporter of Herbert Morrison, secretary of the London Labour Party and Alfred Salter's protégé. Throughout the 1920s Morrison directed Labour effort toward winning the property-owning, rate-payer vote. This meant putting the case for measured municipal improvement in the face of urban decay, while demonstrating Labour commitment to financial rectitude tempered by social responsibility. Morrison built a strong, centralized party machine, encouraging middle-class professional women who were given special standing and valued for their ideas and associations. Lowe was the first woman to serve on the London Labour Party executive, deputy chair of the LCC and in 1934, when Labour won power, chair of the Education Committee. Months before the outbreak of World War Two, she made history as the first woman to attain the role of Council chairman (*sic*).

### **Mapping a political elite: radical habitus in the city space**

After her appointment as chair of the LCC Education Committee, Eveline Lowe made a late night phone call to Helen Bentwich inviting her to become a co-opted member. With an hour to decide Helen rang her mother, then a serving member of Buckinghamshire Education Committee, who advised her to say 'yes'. Helen and her elder brother Hugh had been inducted into labour politics through family and other contacts (Bentwich, n.d.). The Franklins were well within the Anglo-Jewish patriciate known as 'The Cousinhood', so common was intramarriage (Bermant, 1971). Their father was a merchant banker and they grew up in a substantial house in London's Notting Hill. Prior to her marriage their mother attended Bedford College, one of the new colleges associated with the nineteenth century women's movement. Nonetheless, she married at nineteen and participated in voluntary service, as was the custom. Other close relatives included Herbert Samuel the first practicing Jew appointed to the British Cabinet and Samuel Montagu the Gladstonian Liberal who became MP for Whitechapel in 1885. Hugh was Clifton College and Cambridge-educated, Helen attended St Paul's Girls' School and Bedford College, London. A student activist, Hugh joined the Fabians, the Independent Labour Party and the Men's Political Union for Women's Enfranchisement. In 1910 he was sentenced to six weeks' imprisonment after he tried to strike the then home secretary, Winston Churchill, with a dog whip, because he held him responsible for police brutality against suffrage protesters. During two spells of imprisonment he was forcibly fed, apparently over a hundred times, until his release on license under the Prisoners (Temporary Discharge for Ill-Health) Act (prison diary Hugh Franklin papers).

Unlike Hugh, Helen was brought up in the expectation that she would not have a career. Before her wartime marriage to the Zionist lawyer, Norman Bentwich, she engaged in club work for the girls of London's Jewish community, alongside her aunt, Lily Montagu. She recalled:

Some of us were deeply influenced by our work among the poorer members of the community, and became socialists (often in a clandestine way) long before socialism became fashionable. We were shocked by much that we saw and learned, because many of the girls among us led strictly sheltered lives in our homes (Bentwich, 1953, p.17).

In 1916 Hugh, serving on the staff at Woolwich Arsenal, suggested Helen apply for a post there as a Welfare Superior. Sacked for her 'Bolshevik tendencies' after she took part in trade union organisation her familial network helped her secure a post as organiser of the Women's Land Army. In the 1918 general election she distributed Labour leaflets and stewarded at a rally in Albert Hall. Her father was appalled but shortly after she received permission to go to Palestine to rejoin her husband, the British-appointed attorney general, one of the most powerful posts in the mandate government (Bentwich, 1973). In the 1920s Helen combined the political hostess role with educational efforts and service as honorary secretary of the feminist-inclined Palestine Council of Jewish Women.

Helen Bentwich joined the Labour Party soon after her return to London. Characteristic of the 1930s, intellectual recruits like the Franklin siblings both received parliamentary nominations though they were unsuccessful at the polls. Between 1937 and 1965 Helen served continuously either as alderman or as county councillor. She was appointed chairman of the LCC Education Committee in 1947, serving in that capacity until 1950 in which time she promoted the establishment of comprehensive secondary schools. Hugh, however, did not seek elected status on the LCC though he served as a co-opted member until 1946. These were years that coincided with service on the executive of the Webbs' foundation and brainchild, the Fabian Research Department and the Labour Party's Education Advisory Committee. An experience he shared with our next exemplar, Barbara Drake. She, too, had formidable social capital embodied in her aunt, Beatrice Webb. Unlike Eveline, Helen and Hugh the only formal schooling she received was in music besides 'a stint in the cookery school founded by her aunt' (Thom, 2004). University was regarded as a place of punishment for girls. Apparently the family had a saying, 'If you're naughty, you'll have to go to Girton' (Caine, 1986, pp.140-1). In 1900 Barbara married her family's solicitor and moved to London. Afterwards she struggled to secure fair wages for working women as a member of the Fabian Women's Group and the Women's Industrial Council. In 1925 she joined the LCC education committee as a co-opted member. At County Hall she won distinction for 'her long and ultimately successful fight to get milk provided for schoolchildren' besides being a 'passionate advocate' of comprehensive schooling. Historian Brian Simon (1974, p. 83) cites Drake's 1924 Labour Party pamphlet *Staffing in Public Elementary Schools* as indicative of her high calibre contribution to education debate. The writings of fellow Fabian Susan Lawrence were also singled out for praise.

Born into a wealthy legal family, Lawrence was the only one of these party intellectuals to make the progression from local to national government (Rackham, 1948). She took the mathematics tripos at Cambridge but left Newnham College when her father died suddenly in 1898. Inspired by the practical philanthropic work of Lord Shaftesbury she became a manager of church schools and subsequently an elected representation of the London School Board (1900-04). A co-opted member of the LCC Education Committee from 1904, she was elected to the LCC as member for the affluent and safe Tory seat of West Marylebone in 1910, after women regained the

right to stand as candidates. She became Tory vice-chair of the education committee but resigned in 1912 over the issue of the low wages and poor working conditions of women school cleaners. Whereas Shena Simon and the Franklin siblings typify the upper-middle-class recruits from a declining Liberalism, Lawrence's later career shows the Conservative Party lost out also. In 1913 she was elected to the LCC as a Labour councillor for Poplar. Five years later she joined the Labour Party's National Executive Committee and in 1919 the Labour majority chose her to fill one of the aldermanic vacancies on Poplar borough council. This led to her involvement in the Poplar Rates Rebellion of 1921 when she and 29 other Labour councillors were gaoled for their refusal to collect Poplar's poor rate. The controversy strengthened Lawrence's reputation on the left. In 1923 Lawrence was elected as MP for East Ham North and went on to become the first Labour woman to speak in the House of Commons when she opposed cuts in the school meals service. Her parliamentary confrontations with Neville Chamberlain over the Unemployment Insurance Bill in 1927 show her worth as a debater. 'She figured frequently in *Punch's* 'Essence of Parliament', caricatured as Lady Susan MacBeth exclaiming "Infirm of purpose!", and as the Red Queen saying to Alice (the House of Commons) "She can't do sums a bit" (Vallence, 1979, p.104). In 1925-6 she used her public standing as deputy chair of the LCC to mount a challenge to Morrison's leadership of the Labour group (Donoghue and Jones, 2001, p.93). Four years later she became the first woman chairman of the Labour party conference.

One way of reading the positioning of Bentwich, Drake, Franklin and Lowe, is as a struggle to be an organic intellectual, organic to the service of the common good. Lawrence cannot easily be connected with this position. It might be argued that Poplarism was a crucial staging post toward positioning on the left of the Labour Party for Lawrence and in that sense she may be defined as an organic intellectual, organic to the party of working-class defense. Whereas this group all had economic capital, Agnes Dawson did not.

The daughter of a journeyman carpenter who was often out of work, Dawson trained as a pupil teacher before entering residential training college and becoming an elementary school teacher and head teacher in Camberwell, London (Kean, 1990, p.2). Teaching provided a vehicle for the ideals that drew her to feminism and socialism and she was actively involved in the creation of the first feminist union in England and Wales, whose members were to be exclusively women. The union began as an Equal Pay League formed within the National Union of Teachers (NUT) to persuade its largely male leadership to adopt the principle of equal pay as official NUT policy. In 1909 the League changed its name to the National Federation of Women Teachers. The optimism when the partial franchise was won in 1918 conjured visions of a new social world at a time when the occupational opportunities for women were gradually widening. Feminist teachers organised in the NUT thought their moment had come. In 1919 they joined with the Women Teachers' Franchise Union to form the National Union of Women Teachers (NUWT). Never numerically very large (by 1920 there were 21,000 members) the women who turned to the new organisation united in demonstrations and deputations, lobbying and public statements, for the right to full and adequately supported membership of the community, of citizenship. Learning and teaching provided a sounding board for civic engagement. In the early 1920s Dawson struggled to involve working-class parents in the opposition to public spending cuts and helped establish the Parents' National

Educational Union. In 1925, she resigned from her secure and now pensionable post to become a full time union official when the London unit adopted her as their candidate for the LCC elections. It seems she 'had a difficult time on the LCC receiving little support from men who were supposed to be representing education' (Kean, 1990, p. 93). Nonetheless, Dawson was appointed a senior whip of the Labour group, becoming deputy chair of the council in 1932. As leader of the LCC from 1934 to 1940, Herbert Morrison appointed a number of women from the London Labour Party executive to committee chairs including Dawson to general purposes. After much campaigning in July 1935 she scored a notable victory: moving the resolution whereby women teachers and women doctors were allowed to keep their jobs on marriage. After listening to the debate Morrison reminded councillors that she had been a leader in the fight against the marriage bar since it was introduced in 1923, saying 'Miss Dawson is a champion of women, ever an aggressive champion for the cause' (NUWT, 1935).

### **Education as a Site of Struggle: working class secondary education**

Educational politics was seen as an overtly class politics in the inter-war era. In the words of Helen Bentwich:

The two great faults of education were first that it was not unified, that the kind of education a child received depended upon what its parents could afford, and secondly that the continuation of education after the age of fourteen depended not upon a child's ability or desire to remain at school, but solely upon money (*Wembley News*, 14 September 1934).

This meant secondary schools remained overwhelmingly the preserve of the fee-paying middle classes. Most working class children had less than ten years' education and very few won a place in a grammar school aided or maintained by the local authority. Among those who failed to reach the top rung of the scholarship ladder, some eleven-year-olds were selected for a place at a central elementary school providing academic and vocational curricula up to the age of fifteen. In practice they became secondary schools for the most able working class children and they were particularly strong in London. Indeed, by the mid-1920s the central elementary schools were educating almost as many pupils as all the capital's secondary schools (David, 1980; King, 1990, pp. 78, 94).

Social class inequalities became the main concerns of Labour's educational strategy, set out in R.H. Tawney's *Secondary Education for All* (1922). Most of the pamphlet, which became Labour's official programme, concentrates on the detail of how to make secondary education general. Tawney thought the emphasis on a ladder of opportunity for the few morally revolting. His kind of equality was not based on the principle of equality of opportunity but on the principle of equal worth. However this did not mean treating people identically nor did it imply an identity of reward. The kind of argument he presented was based on the need for a common civilisation to promote social well-being around common ends. With hindsight, a mistake was in not paying sufficient attention to a positive conception of what working-class secondary education might mean given the focus on matters of access to educational privilege. Admittedly this was difficult, since Tawney was working with a concept of culture that was outside or above classes. Critics included Susan Lawrence, who told the National Council of Labour Women in 1924 that the environment within the secondary schools was inimical to working-class pupils: 'The standard of expense in games, in clothes, and generally in the social life of the school is too often set by and



for the richer children' (Barker, 1972, p.55). It was hoped and anticipated that the first Labour government of 1923-4 would translate ideals into realities. Lawrence immediately demanded maintenance scholarships in the elementary schools and secondary education for all. Her argument was wonderfully expressive, writing of the working-class parents who cannot get their children into secondary schools and who 'dread for their children the miserable skirmish for underpaid jobs, and who are yet forced by the sheer pressure of poverty to take their children from the safety of the school' (1924, p.8). Hopes were dashed and the depression years saw only abortive attempts to effect change.

Collectively and individually, inside County Hall and at mass meetings, feminists campaigned vigorously against Conservative or National Governments attempts to cut public spending on education. For Lowe this meant pressure group activity in the form of regular articles on education topics in the *Bermondsey Labour Magazine*. Drake and Lawrence concentrated on the dissemination of an alternative education programme under Fabian or Labour Party auspices. Dawson and the NUWT used their own journal, the *Woman Teacher*, to publicise their critique. In October 1922, for example, they called for something more generous in terms of working class access to secondary education and a wider curriculum for the elementary schools than the proposed vocational bias. For the mass of the population this would mean 'education as a means of livelihood and industry rather than as a preparation for life and leisure' (*Woman Teacher*, 8 October 1922, p. 19).

In the winter of 1934-5, Bentwich, Dawson, Drake and Lowe served on an ad hoc LCC subcommittee set up to consider all aspects of London's post-primary education. Chaired by Franklin, his vision, energy and influence was particularly influential. He proposed the ending of selection and laid down a clear rationale for the establishment of a new type of secondary school – the multilateral school – whereby all children would be educated in the same building and receive a common schooling up to the age of fourteen. The committee made two key assumptions. First, that in time it would become impossible to make a sharp and overt discrimination between the financing of the elite schools and the rest. Secondly, members hoped and believed that the multilateral school would 'help to break down any prejudices which may exist regarding the relative merits of one type of post-primary education as compared with another' (*Report*, 8 May 1935). In her unpublished autobiography Bentwich says the report was 'put into storage' due to its implications for grammar school teachers with their preferential salaries, holidays and conditions of service (Bentwich, n.d.). It resurfaced after the abolition of secondary school fees under the 1944 Education Act and the ministerial invitation to local authorities to prepare plans for organizing education in their areas. In London, a policy of setting up 'experimental comprehensives' was already in place and by 1947 the Ministry had approved the London School Plan which went back to the blueprint established by Franklin's committee in the 1930s. Challenging the belief that there are three types of child, it was framed on the basis of the comprehensive neighbourhood school that would advance social equality (Cole, n.d.). Two years later the Labour minister of education, George Tomlinson, approved a proposal to build the capital's first purpose-built comprehensive secondary. Dawson and Lawrence did not live to see the official opening of Kidbrooke School (then a girls' school, now coeducational) in July 1955. Of our six subjects, only the Franklin siblings remained politically active.

### **Making Connections: an intellectual yet political class**

To return to the political vocabulary with which we started, the suggestion is that these ideals were crucial to the recruitment of feminist Labour party intellectuals. Leading lights in city politics their *habitus* was expressive of an inventive and exciting municipal socialism which has been overridden in historical memory by the classic political histories that take the view from Westminster and Whitehall. This is not, however, an argument for alternative heroines. It is, rather, an argument for new ways of seeing the same historical space. To include recognition of the part played by feminists and the several faces of feminism identified by Banks (1981) deriving from three main intellectual traditions – the Enlightenment, Evangelical Christianity, and socialism. Agnes Dawson certainly must be regarded as one of those who saw herself first and foremost as a feminist, firmly located in the equal rights tradition. Her involvement was crucial to the lifting of the marriage bar for London's women teachers but this did not mean she neglected the politics of class as her opposition to underfunding and under staffing of the capital's elementary schools clearly shows. Arguably socialism took precedence over feminism for Helen Bentwich, Barbara Drake, Susan Lawrence and Eveline Lowe. Although they did maintain a tradition of equal rights feminism through a concerted attack on marriage bars and in the case of Drake and Lawrence, pay differentials between male and female workers. In looking at the part these feminists played in working-class movements the influence of different traditions are most clearly articulated in the case of Eveline Lowe who brought a moral fervour to her work combined with support for the goals of welfare feminism as articulated in the Women's Labour League. With these divisions in mind, Hugh Franklin played an interesting part: intimately connected with the suffrage victory, prioritising the issue of educational change after.

Cecil Manning, full-time political organiser and Labour Chief Whip on the LCC from 1925 to 1929, recalled that Herbert Morrison 'used to annoy people by claiming that Labour people weren't good enough and by seeking what he called quality and the intelligentsia' (Donoghue and Jones, 2001, p. 93). It becomes very clear that there were well-educated women, all save Agnes Dawson middle class and arguably in a stronger position to take advantage of early feminist victories. For Dawson, teaching provided a pathway to feminist agency during this historical period. A career in education enabled her to move up into the next class and consequently to draw on the social capital accumulated through investment in suffrage and trade union networks. Nonetheless, the NUWT were acutely aware of the contingent and contested nature of women's agency during this historical period. In a critique of an article by W.G. Cove, the teachers' parliamentary spokesman, a *Woman Teacher* editorial noted Cove's description of the leader of the National Union of Teachers 'as a man of "MASCULINE INTELLECT"... in using such an expression he has ... shown that in his opinion a "masculine" intellect is a better than a feminine one' (5 June 1931, p. 231). For them, this amply demonstrated the need for a woman-only teaching union to represent the interests of women teachers. It underscores the many forces within patriarchal culture that impinge upon a woman's ability to achieve self-determination. The limits of personal efficacy may be examined through the ways in which Susan Lawrence was positioned through the dominant symbolic relations.

Privileged (she had a rentier income) and university-trained, representations both in the period and in the historiography capture the distinction between use-value and exchange-value within the labour movement. 'Virago intacta' was a phrase applied to

her which Beatrice Webb thought ‘as witty as it was true’, concluding that ‘as a woman chieftain she would have led her people into battle and died fighting’ (Harrison, 1987, p.133). On the one hand, historian Josephine Kamm (1966, p. 212) conjures up a ‘dashing looking, slim young woman’ with ‘plenty of courage’. On the other, Brian Harrison (1987, p. 132) presents a ‘formidable figure’ whose ‘masculine and austere appearance, close-cropped hair and highly intellectual manner puzzled the factory girls she now began to address. In time, she would drop the cut glass accent, swap her monocle for glasses and become ‘our Susan’ for the people of Poplar. On the day of her arrest a defiant Lawrence told supporters: ‘I am going if I have to walk all the way to Holloway’. Arguing for the women councillors she observed, ‘we are here representing a principle which we have a right to defend as well as the men’ (Shepherd, 2004, p. 196). Yet George Lansbury said nothing in his introduction to *Red Poplar* (1925, p. 4) conceived as a project of legitimation and validation: his purpose was to respond to critics like Herbert Morrison who saw Poplarism as an irrational obstruction to Labour’s prospects of winning power. ‘Not one of us can boast more than an elementary school education: not one of us is or ever will be one of the “intelligentsia”’ he wrote, to evoke the special bond between Poplar’s Labour councillors and the people who elected them. On the other hand, Morrison had nothing but contempt for what he saw as the irresponsible posturing and radical attitudes of wealthy socialist mavericks. This suggests the difficulty of her positioning where class and gender won’t mesh. A middle-class woman intellectual who is in some ways within the London “intelligentsia” but in some ways not, positioned on the periphery of a social-cum-intellectual circle within which ‘men’s work’ was what conferred symbolic power. But it is unjust to dismiss her challenge to Morrison’s leadership on the grounds that she was ‘highly emotional’ citing her comment, made to a friend, ‘I don’t preach the class war, I live it’ (Donoughue and Jones, 2001, p. 93) as evidence. She herself thought sex irrelevant in ‘in matter of pure intellect’. Embroiled in the fight for equal pay and the abolition of the marriage bar the NUWT leadership knew better. ‘This should be so’ and ‘in a very few noteworthy instances – Miss Lawrence herself, for example, it is so. But, the writer continued, ‘there is a long way to go and hard battles to be fought before it will be universally recognised and applied’ (*Woman Teacher*, 19 June 1931, p.248).

Nevertheless, what is interesting is that when we look beyond the activities and practices of the central state women do emerge as major figures in the field of education politics. They may not have written what have come to be regarded as the central texts of inter-war social democracy, but this study reveals the impact of their hard work was two-fold. Firstly, they contributed to Labour’s advance to power in urban Britain and secondly, they carried forward a radical tradition that became an essential component of London’s education service. Crucially, it was feminist teachers like Agnes Dawson who sought to sustain a popular politics of education. One that included working class parents organised in local pressure groups to defend their children’s schools against savage cuts imposed by central government. Crucially, also, it was women like Eveline Lowe writing in journals like the *Bermondsey Labour Magazine* and the *London Labour Chronicle*, who sought to involve the local community and more particularly, a community of women, in city politics. A historian of audiences might want to speculate about the numbers of ordinary readers who read these materials as opposed to policy texts like Tawney’s *Secondary Education for All*. Political influence is notoriously hard to measure and it depends where one is looking. By profiling local government women we see the

transformative aspects of female agency. They justified their social existence through civic activism but looked to other women to continue the taste for contention through protest and political activity.

To finish I re-articulate the hopes and dreams Olive expressed in the 1980s, at the end of her introduction to *Becoming a Feminist*. What for me was a highly influential exercise in historical sociology because of her chosen emphasis on the process of becoming a feminist and use of biographical and autobiographical material to examine the personal and social characteristics of the feminists themselves. Set against the backdrop of the rise and fall of 'first-wave' feminism, my group biography supports her findings in three ways. First, to lend substance to the claim that feminists were frequently inspired by an ideological commitment to reform. As she says, 'women were much more likely to have a personal motive than men, but they too were frequently inspired less by a sense of the injustice of their own position than by a desire to end the injustice suffered by others' (1986, p. 146). Second, Labour Party support fits the dominant political affiliation of the final cohorts in her sample. Third, there were no mothers within this group of five women and like a high proportion of 'first wave' feminists they were in this sense unrepresentative of the majority of their female contemporaries. As a small contribution to the understanding of feminist pasts my study takes its place alongside Olive Banks' scholarship. It is hoped, however, that as part of a larger project on the making of a metropolitan political elite which emphasises the contribution of feminists and socialists to a radical tradition in London education, it will provide both new insights and new knowledge. Feminist history matters. Olive made this clear in her pioneering contribution to the history of feminism. We need to encounter the past both to enlighten us about the present and in order to contemplate potential futures. Feminist history of the kind she wrote can create a sense of affinity and solidarity with yesterday's activists, their triumphs and tribulations. Studies like *Feminism and Family Planning in Victorian England* (1965) the history Olive published with her husband, Joe, speak to us about the lives of *our* ancestors and *our* families. In dealing with the complexities and complications of history they can provide us with both the insights and the inspiration to confront contemporary problems in international perspective.

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