

Berry Chevasco, 'The Sensational Spirit of Reform: Modern Babylon in Bloomsbury'

Reform in the 19th century is normally viewed through a serious-minded filter, in part because it is the object of scholarly interest, as in the Bloomsbury Project, but also because historical examination can reveal how far-reaching and significant such reforms have since become. So, the notion that the major educational, social and political reforms which emanated from Bloomsbury 150 years ago could also have a sensational side is less familiar today, yet the link might not have surprised Victorians. Reform was very much in the air and it could generate as much excitement, even salacious thrill, as reflective concern.

One of the most notorious cases of such an unlikely juxtaposition of reform with sensationalism involved a journalist and editor, WT Stead, and an eventual change in legislation in the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885. Stead, once one of the most controversial figures in Britain, and indeed beyond, is now much more obscure and a brief background to his relationship with 19th century Bloomsbury is necessary here.

For some years during the Victorian period concern had grown over the thorny problems of prostitution, the age of sexual consent, venereal disease and all related issues. These were not subjects which Victorian society, especially those in the ruling elite of middle and upper classes, found easy to debate, even to consider openly. Nevertheless genuine anxiety surrounded these issues and escalated as the century wore on. The plight of poor prostitutes became increasingly a matter for public concern. Their actual numbers in Britain in the 19th century continues to be a matter for debate; however, it is amply clear that Victorian society perceived prostitution to be an important threat to social order. It was famously felt to be a 'great social evil'¹ and certainly gave rise to much public angst.

Associations were formed throughout the period to address these concerns and to campaign for the reform of legislation dealing with such matters. These were many and often inter-related with overlapping memberships, preoccupations and aims and with names such as The National Vigilance Association, The Society for the Suppression of Vice, the Social Purity Alliance and many more. It can be as problematic to establish a clear picture of the number of these groups and their activities as it can be to establish a statistically reliable idea of the problem of prostitution. Nevertheless it is manifest from their records that concern was widespread and genuine. It was also international. 400 delegates, for example, attended the 2nd annual International Conference on Prostitution held in Brussels in July 1881. On the agenda of this particular meeting was the trafficking of young English girls to European brothels. Again it is very difficult to tease out a coherent picture of sexual trafficking in this period but the disquiet is unmistakable.²

One of the central preoccupations for those troubled by sexual trafficking was that very young English girls were, in their view, becoming victims of the Continent's 'licensed houses

¹ Francis Newman, 'The Cure of the Great Social Evil, February 24 1869.

² Josephine Butler archives, The Women's Library, F2 075, p. 119

of debauchery'³. Of course some of the fears probably arose from that long-standing mistrust in Britain for all things Continental. British reprobates did take themselves off to the 'flesh pots' of Europe and the Continent had always been the haven for bankrupts and other outcasts. However, there was some foundation to the concern. English law allowed very young girls to take part in sexual activity. In Europe the age of consent was around 21, but in 1861 the British Parliament had established it as 12 and although it was fairly quickly revised to 13, social reformers continued to agonize throughout the following decades that such a young age limit left the poor and working classes vulnerable. Many of the groups already mentioned made this issue a focus for their energies. One other such group was headed by the prominent reformer Josephine Butler who famously campaigned for the abolition of the Contagious Diseases Act but who also concerned herself with many related issues and added this one to her list.

The Contagious Diseases Act had been established during the 1860s as an awkward attempt to stem the growing cases of sexually transmitted diseases amongst the armed forces and was meant to apply largely to garrison towns where the problem had grown to worrying levels. It allowed police the right to arrest any woman they suspected of prostitution and subject her to a physical examination. As it was based on the assumption that women were the source of the problem and ignored the role of men, the Act exposed the double standard of Victorian sexual morality and attracted resentment and resistance from those beginning to campaign for women's rights in general. Thus at one point, for example, John Stuart Mill became a Vice President of the Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act, although in 1872 he requested to withdraw from that position while still remaining an ordinary member. His withdrawal from a more public role in their association distressed its governing committee but is not altogether surprising and points to a pattern which developed in social reform during the latter half of the century.⁴

Public concern about such contentious matters as prostitution often intensified quickly and could cause profound controversy on many levels. Many of those seeking reform came from evangelical, religious platforms whose viewpoints would not always mesh easily with more enlightened thinkers like Mill. Links between all the various groups concerning themselves with prostitution and related matters were very tangled and it may be that Mill did not wish to be compromised by a high-profile role in one of these. He was not alone in his prudence. Lord Shaftesbury, for example, withdrew his public support as patron of the homes for fallen women set up in Bloomsbury by Elizabeth Stride when those too became subject to controversy.

Against this confusing backdrop of well-considered, disinterested attempts at social reform struggling within a climate of increasing public emotion we can stand the colourful, enigmatic figure of WT Stead. Stead has been dubbed 'the father of tabloid journalism' and that in itself may be enough today to establish a picture of this once powerful character. He had much of the snake-oil salesman about him as well as a good dose of Dickens's Pecksniff

³ *ibid*

⁴ Letter from John Stuart Mill, 1872, Josephine Butler archives 3A/AR, Volume 2.

but he is not a figure we should ignore. Born in the middle of the century, in 1849, in the north of England, his father was a Congregationalist minister and Stead carried both the language and attitudes of evangelical Christianity into his adult life. He seemed to approach his career in journalism as a mission and in his early years in the north of England established a pattern of reporting which involved writing emotionally charged editorial comment borne out by what he presented as evidence from close personal investigation, the kind of ‘from our own correspondent’ material which is commonplace today. The combination resulted in a heady mixture of financial success for the papers Stead edited, as sales soared, and enough sway of public opinion to have an impact on a number of political and social issues. Stead increasingly viewed himself as someone who could, and more importantly for him, who *should*, play a role in public life.

Another element of Stead’s story involves his relationship with women. He espoused women’s issues early in his career but also seemed to have a personal attraction to powerful women in general. Even after he was married and a father, Stead maintained close relationships with other women, at least one of which seems to have been a dalliance. At best it was certainly a long-lasting flirtation and, although such hypocrisy is hardly uncommon, then and now, it casts a doubtful shadow over Stead’s high-minded posturing in his writing.

In 1880 Stead moved to London and took over the editing of the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Having been a large fish in the comparatively small pond of the north, his sense of entitlement probably helped to spur Stead on to try to leave his mark on the world of journalism and public affairs and he began a series of crusading articles on the social problems of the capital with dramatic titles such as ‘The Bitter Cry of Outcast London’.⁵

In 1881 a Bill to amend the law governing the age of sexual consent was introduced to the House of Lords where it was easily passed. For a variety of reasons, the amendment stalled in the House of Commons and it continued to do so for the following few years. In the early summer of 1885 the Bill was near completion but again failed to go through Parliament. Another suspension of debate threatened and those working towards reform felt an urgent need to push the bill through. Stead was approached by a group of these which included Josephine Butler and Bramwell Booth of the Salvation Army to expose the sordid world of child prostitution in London, the consequence of the low age of consent it was felt, and Stead attacked the task with characteristic missionary zeal.

On July 6 1885 the *Pall Mall Gazette* began its crusading series, ‘The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon’. Stead used classical reference to the legend of the Minotaur and the sacrifice of virgins to launch his tirade against those he termed ‘the dissolute rich’, men who were ‘monsters’ and who used poor young girls for their own base pleasures. The articles were published successively for five days and caused nothing less than a national sensation. With lurid language and graphic detail Stead claimed to expose the horrors of the sexual trafficking of children heading his pieces with emotive titles such as ‘The Violation of Virgins’, ‘Virgins Willing and Unwilling’, ‘The London Slave Trade’, ‘Why the Cries of the

⁵ Grace Eckley, *Maiden Tribute*, (Xlibris 2007), p.38.

Victims are not Heard'. The articles purported to be based on facts gathered by a 'Secret Commission' who were witnesses to the trade in children and it was this claim to have personally investigated his story which gave Stead's series much of its power. Underlying the impression of considered research, highly evocative language and imagery stirred public emotion in a combination which is familiar in today's tabloid press but which was at that point Stead's special formula. Thus he ended his final powerful piece in which he had traced the course of the purchase and deflowering of a child, provocatively headed 'A Child of Thirteen Bought for £5', with this stirring statement;

That was but one case among many, and by no means the worst. It only differs from the rest because I have been able to verify the facts. Many a similar cry will be raised this very night in the brothels of London, unheeded by man, but not unheard by the pitying ear of Heaven—

For the child's sob in the darkness curseth deeper
Than the strong man in his wrath.⁶

The articles caused an instant sensation which spiralled into what became known as 'the agitation'. The working classes and poor of London and elsewhere responded to Stead's distressing accounts of the abuses of those he claimed were from 'Princes of the Blood and prominent public men'. Mass meetings were held throughout the country. The *Pall Mall Gazette* sold out of copies and its offices were besieged by crowds demanding more. The nation became polarized by those who supported Stead's efforts and those who were sickened not just by his subject matter but also by his approach. Letters flooded the press deploring a 'new apocalypse of evil' which was 'tearing aside the veils'⁷ of decency and stirring up of the 'morbid imaginations' of the public. Clergymen wrote outraged sermons on the dangers of exposing the public to such salacious subject matter. The *Spectator* summed up one side of the public mood in exasperated editorials in August regretting that serious-minded debate in Parliament was being 'forced on by the publication of a sort of literature which, however high its motives may have been, is precisely such as men with the worst motives in the world might endeavour to circulate.'⁸

Despite such censure, the mass of public opinion swayed legislators. Debate was resumed and on August 14 the Criminal Law Amendment Act was passed which, amongst other things, raised the age of consent to 16. Stead felt himself to be triumphant somewhat ignoring the long years of lobbying on the part of others such as Josephine Butler. Those who had encouraged Stead in his campaign did indeed feel some satisfaction but many had begun, in gestures which recall those of J S Mill and Lord Shaftesbury, to distance themselves from 'The Maiden Tribute' if not from its consequences. Josephine Butler, for example, who had in some indirect way figured as part of Stead's 'Secret Commission', retreated to Europe in the midst of the controversy and became increasingly ill at ease with Stead's vainglorious assumption of responsibility for this key reform. Mrs Butler had helped Stead's investigations by introducing him to one of her protégées, a reformed prostitute named Rebecca Jarrett.

⁶ W. T. Stead, 'The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon', *Pall Mall Gazette*, July 7 1885.

⁷ Llewellyn Davies, letters to the editor, *The Times*, August 8 1885

⁸ The *Spectator*, August 1 1885.

Stead was to have used Jarrett as a source of information but instead, without Mrs Butler's knowledge and it would appear without the full understanding of Jarrett herself, he used the former streetwalker to provide the details of the case of 'Lily', the thirteen year old child in his incendiary piece 'A Child of Thirteen Bought for £5'.

'Lily', claimed Stead's article, was purchased from her mother for prostitution. She was confirmed a virgin by an examination and then raped while drugged, the template for what Stead and others alleged was happening to very young girls throughout London. The essence of 'Lily's' story may indeed have been plausible, however, it was Stead's declaration that he could 'verify the facts' which eventually led to his downfall in this case. Stead had in fact set up the purchase of 'Lily' through Rebecca Jarrett and his story was essentially a fabrication. No rape took place. In fact 'Lily' had been bundled off to France with members of the Salvation Army for hiding and eventually revealed to be a certain Eliza Armstrong whose poor parents came forward to denounce Stead's story. They claimed to have thought their daughter was entering domestic service and to have no notion that she might end up as a prostitute.

The Eliza Armstrong case makes for fascinating reading but is far too complicated to elaborate in detail here. In essence, a trial ensued in October 1885 and Stead, along with a few others, was convicted of abduction and specifically of procuring a child without parental consent although his real crime had been the fraud of his story. He was sent to Holloway Gaol and Stead made much of what he referred to as his 'martyrdom'. Indeed there is every indication that he relished the attention his imprisonment gave him, making much of the story thereafter by wearing his prison uniform publicly on the anniversary of his sentence and so on.

All this paints a vivid if complex picture of late Victorian preoccupations and the way in which social reform could become entangled with elements and personalities many serious reformers today would find surprising. However, this story of one of the major scandals of the 19th century also twists into Bloomsbury and the concerns of this project. The 'Modern Babylon' of Stead's 'Maiden Tribute' cases, including that of the bogus 'Lily' was to be found in the slums which closely surrounded Bloomsbury at this point. This in itself is useful as contextual detail of what life may have been like during this period for the subject of this study. Yet there is also an unexpected and direct association with one of the key figures of reform in Bloomsbury who has already featured in our programme today.

Millicent Fawcett is remembered as a distinguished campaigner, well-regarded for her role in 19th century social and educational reform. Her writings and stance were never anything but upright and yet, from her address at 2 Gower Street, in 1885 Millicent Fawcett entered into a fairly lengthy correspondence with Stead in which she makes clear her unstinting support at a point when many of his other high-profile sponsors had already backed away. The letters began in August of that year at the height of the 'agitation' with an approach from Stead to Mrs Fawcett thanking her for joining the 200 other well-known women who had signed an open letter endorsing the 'Maiden Tribute' campaign. Stead used this opportunity to initiate, as he had with others such as Josephine Butler, some connection with such a prominent

female reformer. That he should have done so is perfectly in keeping with his fondness for the limelight and for female attention and thus is no surprise. What is striking is that, despite the storm which raged around the 'Maiden Tribute' and Stead's eventual exposure as a fraud, Mrs Fawcett continued to write to him expressing her 'deep admiration' and even suggesting, in November 1885, that she visit him once he was in gaol.

Her suggestion was denied by the governor of Holloway and the two did not meet but their letters continued for some time, exchanging views on women's rights and even poetry as well as more personal notes of sympathy from Mrs Fawcett and gratitude from Stead. That Stead milked this connection and took pleasure in the drama of his 'martyrdom' is manifest in one particular letter he writes to Mrs Fawcett on November 7 1885 in which he theatrically crosses out the heading of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, replacing it with a handwritten 'From the Dock of the Old Bailey while awaiting sentence'. The letter is underscored with self-pity, with plaintive thanks to 'you who have been so good and kind to one who has made such a mess of things. . .' and an express hope that his prison sentence may make 'some atonement for all my blunders and the trouble I have brought to so many good people.'⁹ If his story were less complicated by the other elements already touched upon, this letter could seem sincere and may indeed have been so at least in part. Stead's sincerity is always problematic. Clearly, however, the principled Mrs Fawcett felt him to be so and the continued support in her letters after this in the face of his public disgrace opens a curious window on how 19th century reform could make for very odd bedfellows.

Millicent Fawcett went on to bring about much substantial reform and is honoured by history for her part in the founding of Newnham College, Cambridge, her key position in the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies and her investigation for the British government of the concentration camps of the Boer War. Stead became embroiled in other scandals of the period, although 'The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon' and his exposure for fraud is how he is best remembered. He continued to embrace great public issues and to consider himself an important crusader for social change. In 1912 he accepted an invitation to address the forum of a new religious organization in America and travelled to New York on the *Titanic*, in which he perished along with so many others. An odd postscript to an odd story of a complex period of social change.

⁹ WT Stead to Millicent Fawcett, November 7 1885, Autograph Letters to WT Stead, archive 9/11, The Women's Library London.