

‘THE WOMAN’S BOND OF FREEDOM’: H. G. WELLS, *ANN VERONICA* AND THE SUFFRAGETTES

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H. G. Wells’s depiction of ‘The Woman’s Bond of Freedom,’ the suffragette society with which Ann Veronica becomes embroiled, accords well with the contemporary representations of such an organisation as made by commercial postcard publishers, songwriters and the producers of comic feature films. Wells drew in words the stereotypes that these others depicted in line, or verse, or celluloid. But beyond this general stereotyping, he did also make use of real characters and real situations. This essay takes the fictional versions and links them to what may have been Wells’s own encounters with the suffragette movement.

Ann Veronica is moving towards involvement with the suffragettes when she leaves Morningside Park and, ‘taking her soundings in the industrial sea,’ is drawn by Nettie Miniver into ‘a curious stratum of people who are busied with dreams of world progress’.¹ The reader’s first meeting with some of these people is in the Goopes’ rooms on an upper floor in Theobald’s Road. Although this rather anonymous Bloomsbury thoroughfare is given some character when it passes in front of Gray’s Inn, it is otherwise lined with late-nineteenth-century shops, with offices and flats above. Wells may have had numerous associations with the area, any one of which might be used to link him to that flat on the upper floor, but one woman with whom he might well have been acquainted did live in just such an apartment, at number 30. She was Mrs. Jane Brownlow, a fellow Fabian and a member of the Humanitarian League, a society that promulgated vegetarianism and anti-vivisection and, as Miss Miniver explains, was, along with Higher Thought, Socialism etc, all part of the general ‘coming on’. Mrs. Brownlow had been a long-standing supporter of the suffrage movement, a member of the Pioneer Club, *the* club for the New Woman in the 1890s, and had been secretary of The Women’s Progressive Society. There can be no exact parallel between her situation and that of Mr. and Mrs. Goopes; Mrs. Brownlow had long been a widow. In fact there is little archival evidence of Wells meeting or corresponding with most of the real-life personalities who may be the basis of the characters whom Ann Veronica encounters. As is evident from his mockery, they were not members of his ‘set’ and their names do not occur in accessible Wellsian sources. But it is by no means inconceivable that the path of Mrs. Brownlow may have crossed that of Wells.

One of these occasions could have been a Fabian supper held in London on Wednesday, 29 July 1903. Although neither the Fabian Society archive nor *Fabian News* make mention of this gathering, Wells, a Fabian new boy, who had joined the Society about five months earlier, was present. That Mrs. Brownlow was also there is not unlikely. For, besides Wells, the other person most definitely present

¹ H. G. Wells, *Ann Veronica* (1909), ed. Sita S. Schutt (London: Penguin 2005), 109. Hereafter *AV*.

was Mrs. Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, a woman with whom Mrs. Brownlow was in close contact.²



Figure 1: Mrs. Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy

Mrs. Elmy had travelled to London, from her home in Congleton in Cheshire, for a women's suffrage conference, and on 3 August 1903 described this 'Fabian supper' in a letter:

There were between 50 & 60 at the supper and I had to respond to 'Our Guests' – & greatly delighted the women by my little speech. H. G. Wells, the writer, was there and I had some very interesting talk with him on the woman question about which he is 'thinking, thinking' – and I am sending him material for further thought. He is certain to go far and I hope will give us good service – being, as Stead calls him – the brainiest man and fullest of ideas, of all our modern writers.³ He is as simple as a child, and quite flushed with pleasure when I thanked him in a very few words for his 'Mankind in the Making' which is really splendid work. Unspoiled yet, anyway.⁴

No letter exists in which Wells gives an account of this meeting with Mrs. Elmy. Nowhere does he give any indication of recognising her as the Ann Veronica of her day, her beliefs having caused some historians to claim her as one of the leading feminist theorists on sexuality in late nineteenth-century Britain.⁵ However, thirty years earlier, the practice of those beliefs had led her into direct confrontation with other members of the women's movement. At the very least Wells would have known of her long-involvement in campaigns for the improvement of women's lot, for these must surely have been touched on that July evening in their discussion of 'the woman question'. Perhaps she even asked him

² For Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy (1833-1918), see entry by S.S. Holton in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* and E. Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement: A Reference Guide, 1866-1928* (London: Routledge, 1999), 188-206.

³ W. T. Stead, newspaper proprietor and early supporter of Wells.

⁴ E. Wolstenholme Elmy Papers, Add Mss 47453, f. 149, British Library.

⁵ For a discussion of the work of 'Ellis Ethelmer', the pseudonym under which Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy and Ben Elmy wrote see Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: English Feminism and Sexual Morality, 1885-1914* (London: Penguin, 1995), 141-3.

to join the Male Electors' League, the latest society she and her husband had founded, the aim of which was to exert pressure on men to vote for a government that would enfranchise women.

But if Wells had known anything about Mrs. Elmy's background, he would have been intrigued. For in the mid-1870s, wanting exactly what Ann Veronica was to have, Elizabeth Wolstenholme had put her radical views on the women question into practice, contracting a 'free union' with Ben Elmy, a fellow secularist, minor poet and man of letters. Not for her, alas, a romantic flight to the Continent. She carried on with her work, lobbying in London for the Vigilance Association for the Defence of Personal Rights, until in 1874, when five months pregnant, she was forced, by the leaders of the suffrage movement, to get married. She succumbed to the pressure because the alternative was to be barred from any future practical involvement in the campaigns to which she was so devoted.

There is no evidence of the 'material for further thought' Mrs. Elmy sent to Wells on her return to Congleton, although she had much from which to select. She might have included a copy of *Woman Free*, subtitled 'the physical, political and psychical emancipation of woman,' published in 1893 by the Elmys under the joint pseudonym of 'Ellis Ethelmer'. *Woman Free* comprised 32 pages of verse, backed up by nearly 200 pages of notes, revealing a wide range of reading – Richard Jefferies, Tennyson, Geddes and Thomson's *Evolution of Sex* (1889), Mary Wollstonecraft; Westermarck's *History of Human Marriage* (1891), Walt Whitman, Ruskin, and J. S. Mill. Its central idea – that men's sexual violence and exploitation of women followed from their destruction of the Matriarchate – was very much that which Wells attributes to Nettie Miniver in *Ann Veronica*. Moreover his description of Miss Miniver's style as 'a 'mixture of fragments of sentences heard, of passages read, or arguments indicated rather than stated – all of it [was] served in a sauce of strange enthusiasm, thin yet intense' might well have been influenced by a reading of *Woman Free* (AV, 3).

Or perhaps Mrs. Elmy sent Wells another work by Ellis Ethelmer – *Phases of Love: As It Was, As it Is; As It May Be (A History of Human Passion, and of its Advance From Physical to Psychic Character and Attribute)*, published in 1897. Or, of course, she may have sent some of the pamphlets published by the Women's Emancipation Union, one of several radical societies she founded. Perhaps, too, Mrs. Brownlow's tract on 'Women and Factory Legislation' was included in the parcel. Mrs. Brownlow had been a generous subscriber to the Women's Emancipation Union; Mrs. George Bernard Shaw was another with dual membership of the Fabians and the WEU. Perhaps Mrs. Elmy tucked in a WEU leaflet, 'Why do Women demand the Franchise?' Among the answers to the question it posed were the following:

Because no truly free race of men can be reared from slave mothers

Because the help of politically enfranchised women is needed for the upbuilding of the higher humanity that is to be.⁶

Both of these precepts might have been averred by Miss Miniver. All in all, Mrs. Elmy's parcel would have included a wealth of riches to provide Wells with material on which to base the travesty of a mind with which he furnishes Nettie Miniver.

Moreover, Wells's description of Miss Miniver's physical appearance is nothing less than the caricature of a suffragette as depicted on numerous commercially published postcards: 'a slender lady of thirty or so in a dingy green dress, – large emotional blue eyes – magnified by glasses she wore, and her nose was pinched and pink and her mouth whimsically petulant. Ivory button – Votes for Women' (*AV*, 30). For Miss Miniver has absorbed the message that acquiring a parliamentary vote is the solution to all women's ills and was one of 'a small but energetic minority, the Children of Light,' for whom 'everything [...] was "working up" [...] "coming on" – the Higher Thought, the Simple Life, Socialism, Humanitarianism – Christ and Buddha and Shelley and Nietzsche and Plato. Pioneers all of them' (*AV*, 110-1). Incidentally, the obituary of her husband that in 1906 Mrs. Elmy contributed to the *Westminster Review* has, too, its echo of Whitman, being entitled 'Pioneers, O Pioneers'.

The Goopes, the hosts at the gathering to which Miss Miniver brings Ann Veronica, are another contemporary stereotype – the Simple Lifers. Mrs. Goopes's 'purple djibbah with richly embroidered yoke' was just the attire of some of the more advanced-thinking suffragettes and Wells's readers would have known just what he meant when he allowed her to assist in the management of a fruit shop in the Tottenham Court Road. Benjamin Shearn and Son, fruiterers, 'the World's Largest Fruitarian Stores,' had premises at 231 Tottenham Court Road, as well as nearby in Store Street and Torrington Place.⁷

⁶ Women's Emancipation Union pamphlets, 8416.h.40 (49), BL.

⁷ For the wearing of a djibbah by a member of the Women's Freedom League hear Marie Lawson, Brian Harrison Tape Collection, 8SUF-B-024, Women's Library.

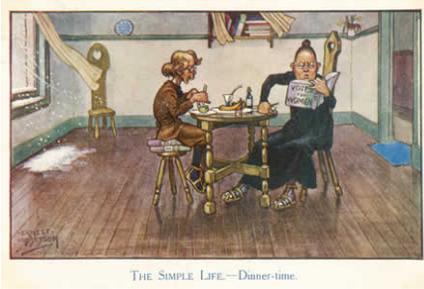


Figure 2: Mr. and Mrs. Goopes?

The others in the Goopes's apartment that evening can be identified rather more certainly. The 'very old lady with an extremely wrinkled skin and a deep voice, who was wearing what appeared to Ann Veronica's inexperienced eye to be an antimacassar on her head' (*AV*, 113) can only be Mrs. Charlotte Despard, who was never seen without a black chiffon mantilla adorning her snow-white hair. Wells does not sketch in the old lady's feet, but if he had done so he could have drawn the 'Simple Life' sandals as worn by Mrs. Despard. Wells and Mrs. Despard moved in similar circles and it would be surprising if he had not met her. Certainly by 1908 he would have known of her from the newspapers as the leader of one of the militant societies, the Women's Freedom League (WFL). This group had in 1907 broken away from Mrs. Emmeline Pankhurst's Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). It hardly seems worth pointing out that Wells's choice of a name for his suffragette society, The Women's Bond of Freedom, was very similar to that of Mrs. Despard's organisation.

Although a socialist, Mrs. Despard was not a member of the Fabians but there were others who combined membership with that society with their membership of either the WFL or WSPU. One such was Beatrice Sanders, the WSPU's assistant treasurer, whose husband, William, was a Fabian Society lecturer and an LCC alderman. Sanders was a member of the Fabian Society 'Old Gang' who ranged themselves against Wells when he attempted to institute reform. Although there were always several Fabian Society members elected as councillors to the LCC, there were far fewer Fabian aldermen. So William Sanders could have provided the model for the character of Alderman Dunstable, mocked by Wells that evening in the Goopes's apartment.

Sanders wrote for the *New Age*, a weekly magazine of politics, literature and the arts, which had been relaunched, with funding from Shaw and others, in the spring of 1907. There were many Fabians, other than Sanders, among its contributors and it was the battleground on which the fight for reform between Wells and the 'Old Gang' was carried out. The editor of this new *New Age* was Alfred Orage, who was surely the model for the 'roguish-looking young man with an orange tie and a fluffy tweed suit' (*AV*, 113), the assistant editor of *New Ideas*, to which Mrs. Goopes contributed articles on vegetarianism. In fact, in describing him, his friend

Holbrook Jackson particularly mentions that Orage ‘wore a plain hand-woven silk tie, sometimes blue, but oftener an orange or flame colour’.⁸

Orage had dabbled with theosophy, of which Mrs. Despard was a devotee, but had by now taken up Nietzsche, just as Wells’s young man with the orange tie was happy to discuss the critique of Nietzsche and Tolstoy that had appeared in his paper. But Orage was linked not only to Fabianism and Higher Thought, but also to the women’s suffrage movement. In February 1907 he had been the only man among many women arrested while taking part in a WSPU demonstration outside the House of Commons. So, although there was no specific mention of women’s

suffrage at that gathering in the upper room in Theobald’s Road, a subtext linking the characters to the Cause may be perceived.

It was not long afterwards that Miss Miniver furthered Ann Veronica’s education in ‘dreams of world progress’ by taking her to ‘a meeting of the advanced section of the woman movement in Caxton Hall.’ This Wells describes as ‘A much larger and more enthusiastic gathering’ than the Fabian Society meeting but one ‘where the same note of vast changes in progress sounded’. Caxton Hall, being very close to the houses of Parliament, was a venue favoured by both the WSPU and the WFL. Photographs of such meetings as Ann Veronica attended demonstrate the animation of the members of the audience, who like Ann Veronica ‘applauded and uttered cries’ (*AV*, 117). No wonder Ann Veronica is ‘carried off her intellectual and critical feet’ and in a defiant gesture against her personal lot – as a woman in love and economically unfree – eventually finds her way to the offices of the Woman’s Bond of Freedom in Chancery Lane.



⁸ Quoted in Philip Mairet, *A. R. Orage* (London: Dent, 1936), 24.

Figure 3: WSPU Meeting in Caxton Hall: ‘I knew you would feel it,’ said Miss Miniver.

Although neither of the militant societies had an office in Chancery Lane, in 1908 they were based in that area of London. The Women’s Freedom League had its office in Robert Adam Street, south of the Strand, and the WSPU was just to the north, at 4 Clements Inn. The address of the Women’s Bond of Freedom, 107A Chancery Lane, may have had a resonance for Wells. For Miss Gertrude Ansell ran her typing office from 70 Chancery Lane and for many years – month in and month out – had advertised her services in *Fabian News* – ‘Neat, Accurate, Prompt, Moderate Charges’. Miss Ansell was also a vegetarian, an anti-vivisection campaigner, a member of the Fabian Woman’s Group and an active member of the

WSPU.⁹ Wells could have encountered her and subconsciously, or consciously, used an address rather similar to hers as the location of his suffrage society.

That may be a tenuous link, but Wells could not have been sufficiently incurious, during one of his frequent visits to the Fabian Society at 3 Clement’s Inn, to have resisted the temptation to peek into the WPSU offices at no 4. His description of the Women’s Bond of Freedom office, with its ‘notice boards bearing clusters of newspaper slips, three or four posters of monster meetings [...] and a series of announcements in purple copying ink, and in one corner [...] a pile of banners’ (*AV*, 184) reflects accurately the WSPU office scene as it appears in photographs. When, at length, Ann Veronica meets the young leader of the society, Miss Kitty Brett, there is no doubt as to whose presence she is in – that of Mrs. Pankhurst’s eldest daughter, Christabel. Wells describes Kitty Brett as ‘one of the most conspicuous leaders of the movement,’ who ‘had been trained by an implacable mother to one end’ (*AV*, 186). Teresa Billington-Greig, one of the WSPU’s young activists, described Emmeline Pankhurst as:

A force, vital and resourceful. I was to see her enslaving the young rebel women by the exploitation of emotion. [...] She was ruthless in using the followers she gathered around her, as she was ruthless to herself. She took advantage of both their strengths and their weaknesses. [...] She was a most astute statesman, a skilled politician, a self-dedicated reshaper of the world – and a dictator without mercy.¹⁰

The adjectives Wells used to describe Kitty Brett – ‘aggressive and disagreeable’ – ‘a person of amazing persuasive power’ – ‘mesmeric force’ (*AV*, 186) – were equally applicable to Christabel Pankhurst, of whom her acolyte,

⁹ Crawford, 14-5.

¹⁰ T. Billington-Greig, *The Non-Violent Militant: Selected Writings of Teresa Billington-Greig*, ed. Carol McPhee and Ann FitzGerald (London: Routledge, 1987), 95.

Annie Kenney, wrote, ‘Fear, doubt, uncertainty were words that never crossed her brain. The fluent enthusiasm and ‘quick and use-hardened repartee’ (*AV*, 186) with which Kitty Brett disposes of Ann Veronica’s interpolation were just Christabel’s style.

For there is no doubt in Kitty Brett’s mind that the parliamentary vote was the answer to everything.

‘What do we want? What is the goal?’ asked Ann Veronica.

‘Freedom! Citizenship! And the way to that – the way to everything – is the Vote.’ (*AV*, 186-7)

This is the terminology with which those attending suffragette rallies became very familiar and the aspect of the movement, along with what he considered the petty badgering of cabinet ministers, Wells most disliked. He did not think that woman’s position would be radically altered merely by the possession of a vote.



Figure 4: Christabel Pankhurst by *Spy*: ‘[Kitty Brett] was perhaps three-and-twenty, and very pink and healthy-looking, showing a great deal of white rounded neck and a good deal of plump, gesticulating forearm out of her short sleeve.’

Christabel was to modify the mantra slightly by 1913, when she called for ‘Votes for Women and Chastity for Men,’ a slogan unlikely to appeal any better to Wells.

Ann Veronica does not want to sit and talk. “Give me something to do,” she tells Kitty Brett (*AV*, 188). That ‘something’ was participation in what was known as the ‘Pantehnicon Raid,’ an event that in the real world took place on 11 February 1908 and was very fresh in Wells’s mind as he sketched the scene. ‘The van started with a jerk and rumbled on its way “It’s like Troy!” said a voice of rapture, “It’s exactly like Troy!”’ (*AV*, 190). Wells had clearly studied the newspaper reports of the incident, which were packed with Trojan horse similes.

As Wells describes, on that February day detachments of police were standing around Westminster Abbey awaiting the deputation that was expected to sally forth from Caxton Hall. WSPU members were gathered there, protesting against the fact that at the opening of parliament the King’s speech had made no mention of any measure to enfranchise women. In her history of the suffragette movement, Sylvia Pankhurst reported that:

Just as a van was passing the Strangers’ Entrance the boy lying along its back ledge, sprang up, the back doors of the van flew open wide and one-and-twenty

women plunged out and made a rush for the House of Commons. They were blinded by the broad daylight after their long ride in the darkness of the van, and as they jumped, many of them fell on their knees and groping helplessly, ran the wrong way. Nevertheless there were some who headed straight for the door-way and two of them managed to get inside, only to be flung back instantly, whilst the police closed round and several arrests were made.¹¹

Ann Veronica is one of those who rushed past the policemen only to be ‘most horribly clasped around the waist and lifted off the ground’ (*AV*, 192). Wells had



Figure 5: Policemen and Suffragettes: The popular view. ‘And then she began to wriggle and fight like a frightened animal against the men who were holding her.’

evidently studied the reports of the sentences meted out on the Pantechnicon Raid suffragettes. Like Ann Veronica they were ‘bound over’ for £40 to keep the peace for 12 months or, if they would not agree to this, were required to serve six weeks’ imprisonment. Ann Veronica got off lightly with only a month. As Holloway already had its quota of suffragette prisoners, Ann Veronica was sent, after ‘a long rambling journey in a stuffy windowless van’ (*AV*, 196), to the fictional Canongate Prison, the name doubtless suggested by Cannon Row police station to which the Pantechnicon suffragettes had been taken after their arrest. On occasion suffragette prisoners were indeed spread out around other prisons in order not to swamp Holloway.

Ann Veronica’s experience of her induction into prison is just as described by suffragette prisoners. They particularly complained about the foul and evil-smelling underclothing and the constant threat of head lice. Cells, in 1908, were

¹¹ E. Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement* (London: Gay & Hancock, 1911), 195-6.

only furnished with a stool, such as Ann Veronica's chaplain monopolises. As for Ann Veronica's pre-occupations during her imprisonment, these were her own. There are many suffragette memories of imprisonment but none that revolves around thoughts of a lover. The prison library, on the other hand, does loom large in such memoirs. In Holloway, just as Wells describes, the library was administered by the Church of England chaplain, and, although there are no reports of any prisoner reading Morley's essay *On Compromise* (1874), that tenet of Liberalism that Ann Veronica was barred from reading, in 1910 one suffragette prisoner was able to read Mill, *On Liberty* (1859), recommended, she said, by the

prison librarian, and another read both *On Liberty* and Mill's *Subjection of Women* (1869).¹²

On her release, Ann Veronica, together with her aunt, is swept along by the Bond of Freedom marshals into one of the wagonettes that then processes triumphantly to the Vindicator Vegetarian Restaurant. Wells, again, had been following events closely; the released Pantechnicon Raid prisoners were indeed carried in a triumphal procession from Holloway to celebrate with a breakfast at the Eustace Miles Restaurant, London's leading vegetarian venue. Here Ann Veronica takes leave for the last time of her erstwhile comrades, arriving home with her aunt 'with headaches and the trumpet voice of the indomitable Kitty Brett still ringing in their ears' (*AV*, 209).

When Ann Veronica returns to her laboratory, and to Capes, she was met with a 'sort of suffragette reception' during the course of which the name of Thomas Bayard Simmons 'who had rioted in the Strangers' Gallery' is mentioned (*AV*, 216-7). Simmons had been the first man to be imprisoned for taking part in a suffrage demonstration, earning himself the soubriquet of 'suffra-geant'. He was a Secularist, a Fabian, later a contributor to the *New Age* and, here we come full circle, a member of Mrs. Elmy's Male Electors' League.

So ends Ann Veronica's involvement with the Women's Bond of Freedom, whose members were doubtless already planning their next spectacular demonstration as, in real life, the WSPU and WFL were looking forward to 21 June and a magnificent procession through London. On the day, in one of the leading carriages rode Mrs. H. G. Wells.

When it was published, *Ann Veronica* was listed among 'Books Received' in the WSPU paper, *Votes for Women*, but, unsurprisingly, was never reviewed. Although denied the WSPU's opinion of the book, was Mrs. Elmy thus alerted to its

¹² Crawford, 348.

publication? If so, did she read *Ann Veronica* and recall her hope that ‘H. G. Wells, the writer [...] will give us good service.’