

The Feminism and Political Radicalism of
Helen Taylor in Victorian Britain and
Ireland

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Abstract

This thesis offers an examination of the feminism and political radicalism of Helen Taylor. Despite the growth of interest in the political and social campaigns of nineteenth century women, Helen Taylor has remained a marginal figure of historical enquiry, referenced mainly in terms of her relationships with her contemporary English feminists and step-father, John Stuart Mill. Divisions in the women's suffrage movement have been blamed on her difficult personality with no examination that it was her socialist anti-imperial feminism which was at the heart of the antagonism. Her important contribution to Victorian social and political life has been largely ignored. The study will examine the significance of her work across a wide range of political and social organisations from 1876 onwards; namely the London School Board, the Irish question, land reform, the Social Democratic Federation, her attempt to become the first woman MP and her membership of the Moral Reform Union. This work will illustrate how the political ideology of her feminist mother Harriet Taylor and her step-father John Stuart Mill remained at the heart of Helen's political throughout her public life. It will further consider how the organisations she joined were gendered and how she attempted to negotiate and contest this. It will ask why she was able to successfully resist the middle class ideal of separate spheres for men and women. Finally it offers further evidence to challenge the claim made by some historians that all British Victorian feminists were imperialist in nature.

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1. Introduction: scope and aims; relationship to the previous historiography

Scope and aims

This thesis will explore the contribution of Helen Taylor to the political, economic and social movements of nineteenth century Britain and Ireland and explain how her political beliefs developed and why they set her apart from many British feminists of her generation. The depth of her political involvement, always driven by her belief in the moral necessity of sexual equality, led to a schism with many fellow suffragists due to her chosen causes, such as Home Rule for Ireland, which was politically unacceptable to many within the British feminist movement.

Contemporary sources, both published and private, reveal Helen's importance to the political and social life of her day, in particular the years 1876 to 1888, though the historiography has failed to show this. Many of her campaigns for equality remain relevant today when women's pay and employment opportunities still lag behind those of men. Helen's public work shows how, by the 1880s, women were becoming overtly political and entering the male world of politics and public life in mixed gendered organisations. Anti-slavery and suffrage campaigns had allowed women to carve out political agency but Helen entered the wider political world of men in the organisations she joined and demanded, though she did not always receive, gender equality within them. This work will examine how her feminism informed her radicalism and socialism and vice versa and how these three political commitments determined her participation in politics throughout her public life and influenced the campaigning groups of which she was a member. Thereby this study will enhance our understanding of women's political involvement in Victorian

society through an examination of her work on the London School Board, her support for Irish Home Rule and extensive involvement with the Ladies' Land League during the Irish Land War, her membership of the Land Reform Union, the English Land Restoration League and the Democratic Federation, and how she combined these campaigns with her work on women's suffrage.

It will further examine her often strained relations with the Liberal Party, her work with the Moral Reform Union and her campaign to be elected as an independent Radical MP for Camberwell in 1885. This analysis of her wide-ranging political allegiances will throw light on her conflicts with contemporary British feminists, which have often been blamed solely on Helen's 'difficult' personality. It will be argued that her reported intransigence can be better explained through an understanding of her radical socialist politics, which informed the international anti-imperial nature of her feminism, at odds with the pro-Empire stance of many within the suffrage movement.

Thus this thesis will explore Helen's hitherto ignored achievements and the important contribution she made to the radical and socialist politics of her day. Despite Henry George, arguably the leading political economist of the 1880s, calling her 'one of the most intelligent women I have ever met,'¹ her contributions across a wide range of political and social arenas have been overlooked. She has been referenced mainly in terms of her relationships with her step-father, John Stuart Mill, and her contemporary English feminists. This, though, ignores her involvement in some of the major political issues of the day – the Irish question and

¹ Henry George (jnr), *The Life of Henry George* (New York, 1904), p. 361.

land reform throughout Britain – and her work to ameliorate the lives of the working class through her election to the London School Board. Her involvement in Irish politics and in groups calling for land ownership reform show her to have been a significant political player who rejected the received ideas of the civilising mission of the British Empire. She crossed the political boundaries of her class and nationality to form friendships and alliances with those who worked to bring radical change to Victorian society, including the ex-Fenian Michael Davitt, the Irish nationalist Anna Parnell and Henry George. For example, she was President of the Ladies' Land League of Great Britain, an organisation which Anna Parnell, President of the Irish Ladies' Land League, believed had the revolutionary potential to end British rule in Ireland.² Yet neither this nor her work for land reform has received any detailed attention from historians; she has been mentioned merely as an historical footnote. Indeed, it is literally in the footnotes of historical works she is often referenced.

A further objective of this thesis is to locate Helen in the world of Victorian Liberal politics and social campaigning and it will be established in the following chapters that many of the conflicts between Liberals and herself were caused by her move towards radical socialism. After 1885 she returned to her liberal roots and worked more closely with the Liberals after Gladstone's adoption of support for Home Rule for Ireland which split the party. It is necessary here to briefly clarify what Liberalism meant to those who classed themselves as Liberals during the era of Helen's public work. This will enable Helen's liberal heritage, which is a continuing theme of this thesis, to be fully understood.

² Anna Parnell, *The Tale of a Great Sham*, ed. Dana Hearne (Dublin, 1986).

In 1885 Andrew Reid edited a book in which leading Liberals, both MPs and campaigners expressed why they supported the Liberal party and what it meant to be a Liberal.³ Time and time again the contributors mention the utilitarian philosophy of it being a means to secure the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people.⁴ This philosophy, founded by Jeremy Bentham earlier in the century, had been the creed of a number of public figures, includes John Stuart Mill's father James. Liberalism also meant, to the Victorian mind, equality and progress in society through greater democracy and an increase in voting and social rights for the working-class.⁵ This study will show how, despite growing support for women's suffrage, not all Liberals supported the demand for sexual equality. In addition, a central tenet of Victorian liberalism lay in the importance attached to the freedom of the individual. The greatest happiness for the greatest number of people should, however, safeguard individual rights.⁶ It also meant an adherence to the concept of free trade which had been fiercely fought for by the campaigners against the Corn Laws during Helen's teenage years in 1846.⁷

Helen was imbued in this liberal world from childhood, a fact that will be illustrated in the next chapter. It was her step-father John Stuart Mill who had modified the above Utilitarian philosophical ideas by adding a social dimension. He believed that the state had a part to play in securing the equality demanded by Liberals and this might at times have to take precedence over the rights of the individual. For

³ Andrew Reid (ed.), *Why I am a Liberal* (London, 1985).

⁴ *Ibid*, Arthur Arnold, MP, p 17, Thomas Catling, p. 38, Rt Hon Lord Hurlow, p.97.

⁵ *Ibid*, Joseph Arch p 16, Henry Broadhurst, MP, p. 35, Millicent Garret Fawcett, p. 43, Alice Westlake, p. 107.

⁶ *Ibid*. Amongst those to mention individual liberty as their reason for being a Liberal are Professor J S Blackie, p. 31, Rev John Hopps, p. 59 and the Rt Hon James Stansford, MP, p 93.

⁷ George W E Russell MP declared his adherence to the concept of free trade to be at the heart of his liberal radicalism, p. 81. For a detailed account of the Anti-Corn Law League see Asa Briggs, *The Age of Improvement* (London, 1959), pp. 312-25.

example, chapter 4 of this thesis will cite Mill's belief that land was too important to be left to market forces and private individual control and that the state should control its use and ownership.⁸ This thesis will show how Helen went further and stepped out of her step-father's shadow in her adherence to the concept of land nationalisation. Mill had expressed himself in favour of peasant proprietorship not state ownership.⁹ Chapter 5 will show how she further diverged from liberal thought by embracing Marxism for a short time. She was on the executive of the Social Democratic Federation which called for workers to own the means of economic production and which called for the state to own all land.

Likewise this study will show that much of the animosity Helen faced in the 1880s from the official Liberal party stemmed from her support for Home Rule for Ireland and her opposition to Gladstone's Irish policy in the early 1880s. Her public opposition to the Coercion Laws passed by the Liberal Government to stem the unrest in Ireland during the Land War of 1879-82 will be used as evidence in this work to explain the animosity of the party to Helen's work at the London School Board. Helen, it will be shown regarded coercion and the suspension of normal British law in Ireland as anti-democratic and a negation of true Liberal values. John Stuart Mill had seen Irish land reform as a way of keeping the Union between the two countries. He had advocated what would become the demands of the Irish Land League: Free sale of land, fixity of tenure and fair rents as a means as a means of protecting the Act of Union between Great Britain and Ireland of 1801. He had called for a peasant proprietorship of land not the land nationalisation which Helen and Michael Davitt and fellow members of the Land Nationalisation Society would

⁸ For Mill's position on land ownership see Ursula Vogel, 'The Land Question: A Liberal Theory of Communal Property,' *History Workshop Journal* vol. 27 (1989), pp. 106-135, p. 106.

⁹ *Ibid.*

demand.¹⁰ Until 1870 most radicals believed that the Act of Union Ireland was indissoluble.¹¹ This thesis will show how Helen moved from these views in embracing the demand for land nationalisation and Home Rule for Ireland. Thus although this work will cite evidence of how her step-father's political philosophy influenced her throughout her life it will evidence how in declaring herself openly as a socialist in her public speeches she caused animosity between herself and many in the Liberal party.

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The nature of Victorian liberal feminism and the support many feminists gave to the imperial project is discussed more fully later in this chapter and throughout the thesis. Here it is suffice to say that it differed from what we understand as liberal feminism today. The term liberal feminism as it relates to Helen should not be confused with modern liberal feminism which sees men and women as equal and essentially the same but unequal through cultural and social laws and customs. It is an aim of this thesis to evidence throughout how Victorian feminists believed men and women differed in their very essence and they called for equality for women in terms of their sex being morally superior. Their full inclusion in society would, they believed, lead to its moral improvement. Victorian feminists believed in the superiority of women's moral sense. Evidence for this will be given throughout this work.

¹⁰ Thomas William Heyck, *The Dimensions of British Radicalism: The Case of Ireland*, (Illinois 1974), p.19.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p.20.

There is a gap in the historical knowledge of Victorian women's contribution to society which, in concentrating almost exclusively on women's suffrage and social campaigns, has marginalized other aspects of women's political agency. By focusing on Helen's conflicts with her fellow suffragists, without exploring the political ideologies which must have been at the heart of the discord, historians have underplayed Helen's political achievements. This thesis intends to give Helen her rightful place in the historiography with the first detailed account of her political and social life. Furthermore, exploring in depth the full involvement of Helen in the social and political campaigns of her day will reveal how her political, economic, and social priorities informed her feminism and affected her relationship with her fellow suffragists. It will thus demonstrate that the conflicts between her and her fellow British feminists arose not out of mere petulance but were a consequence of her political beliefs.

Relationship to the previous historiography

Despite the rise of women's history and the resulting growth of interest in the political and social campaigns of nineteenth century women, Helen Taylor has remained a marginal figure of historical enquiry.¹² This is an unfortunate omission as a full, detailed study of her would lead to a greater understanding of women's active involvement in Victorian society in the public sphere across a much wider spectrum than the 'women's concerns' of suffrage and morality and the focus on women's anti-slavery campaigns and philanthropy, which have been extensively examined. Helen's political life was, in fact, spent largely in the public sphere of the male world of politics. The organisations she joined were outside the realm of what

¹² As an example see Sandra Stanley Holton, 'Women and the Vote', in June Purvis (ed.), *Women's History: Britain, 1850-1945* (London, 1995), chapter 11, pp. 281-2. Helen is referenced solely for her role in the formation of the first women's suffrage committees.

was expected for women, who, for example, could carve out a niche for themselves in philanthropic work. There is little written exclusively on Helen Taylor except for a number of short biographical overviews and the occasional journal article focusing on a specific aspect of her life, e.g. her writings on women's suffrage,¹³ her attempt to be nominated as parliamentary candidate for Camberwell¹⁴ and as an example of a Victorian traveller who respected other civilisations and traditions, which overturns the accepted picture of the orientalism of the Victorian traveller.¹⁵ Historian Ann Robson also records in an article the important contribution Helen made, over twenty years, to Mill's work and thought when she became his constant companion after the death of her mother.¹⁶ Olive Banks, however, makes no mention of Helen in her *Biographical Dictionary of British Feminists*.¹⁷ The short accounts written about Helen acknowledge both her important contribution to feminism and political campaigns of the nineteenth century and the strained relationships she had with many of her colleagues and contemporaries.¹⁸ The biographical sketches suggest the breadth of her interests and her radicalism;¹⁹ they also reveal glimpses of her political work for Irish Home Rule and her contribution to the welfare of the working class through her membership of the London School Board.

¹³ Andrea Bromfield, 'Walking a Narrow Line', *Women's Studies*, vol. 26, (1997), pp. 259–283.

¹⁴ Evelyn Pugh, 'The First Woman Candidate for Parliament', *International Journal of Women's Studies*, 1 (4) (1978), pp. 378–90.

¹⁵ Ann Robson, 'Helen Taylor and John Stuart Mill: Travels with a Donkey', *Queen's Quarterly*, 101 (2) (1994), pp. 319–43.

¹⁶ Ann Robson, 'Mill's Second Prize in the Lottery of Life', in John M. Robson & Michael Laine (eds.), *A Cultivated Mind: Essays on J.S. Mill Presented to John M. Robson*, (Toronto, 1991), chapter 8.

¹⁷ Olive Banks, *Biographical Dictionary of British Feminists*, (New York, 1990).

¹⁸ Phillipa Levine, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford, 2004).

¹⁹ Elizabeth Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement; a reference guide 1866-1928* (London, 1999).

Biographers of John Stuart Mill have examined the influence of Helen on her step-father and depict her upbringing as it related to his life.²⁰ Packe²¹ and Kinzer, Robson and Robson,²² while acknowledging her work on suffrage and the importance of her collaboration with her step-father, dismiss her as unreasonable, with a self-absorbed personality.²³ Packe disparages her as ‘priggish and overpowering’ and ‘mean suspicious, truculent.’²⁴ These Mill biographers do, however, throw some light on how the circumstances of Helen’s unusual upbringing influenced her intellectual development. Further knowledge of her early life is gleaned from Kent’s examination of her short career as an actress as an illustration of how the profession allowed women some degree of independence despite the immorality associated with the theatre. Davis, in her exploration of the working lives of Victorian actresses, dismisses Helen’s attempt to become a professional actress as a privileged whim during which she looked down on her socially inferior fellow thespians and after which indulgent experience ‘she returned home to assist Mill in a secretarial capacity.’²⁵ This is far from the truth. Helen returned home, abandoning her theatrical ambitions, because of the death of her mother; her work with Mill for more than a decade was intellectual collaboration not mere secretarial.

Historians of the Victorian land movement acknowledge Helen’s contribution in passing but there has been no full exploration or assessment. Lawrence highlights her importance as a link between the old Land Tenure Reform movement of Mill

²⁰ See Michael St John Packe, *The Life of John Stuart Mill* (New York, 1954) and Bruce L. Kinzer, Ann P. Robson & John M. Robson, *A Moralist in and out of Parliament: John Stuart Mill at Westminster, 1865-1868* (New York, 1992).

²¹ Packe, *The Life of John Stuart Mill*.

²² Kinzer, Robson & Robson, *A Moralist in and out of Parliament*, p. 188.

²³ Christopher Kent, ‘Image and Reality: The Actress in Society,’ Martha Vicinus, (ed.), *A Widening Sphere: Changing roles of Victorian Women*, (Indiana, 1977), Chapter 5.

²⁴ Packe, *The Life of John Stuart Mill*, p. 412.

²⁵ Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their social identity in Victorian culture* (London, 1991), p. 73.

and the new land reforming groups, citing how the American political economist Henry George was introduced to the Land Nationalisation Society by Helen.²⁶ Wolfe draws attention to the importance of Helen in the creation of the Land Nationalisation Society and the continuity she provided with earlier reforming groups. He also gives her the credit for bringing Henry George into close collaboration with British land reforming organisations.²⁷ In general, though, Helen's contribution has been passed over in the historiography of Victorian land reform. So we have Douglas managing to write an entire book on the history of the land question 1878-1952 without referencing Helen once.²⁸

The literature on the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) is also lacking a full assessment of Helen's role. An exception is Wolfe, who references Helen as the most important person in the organisation at its inception, due to her large working-class following and her work on the London School Board.²⁹ Wolfe highlights the challenge Helen posed to the leadership of Hyndman and charts the tensions between them which led to Helen leaving the SDF, along with her fellow radicals steeped in an earlier tradition, who could not accept Hyndman's class warfare and incitement to violence.³⁰ Karen Hunt's examination of women in the SDF totally ignores Helen's contribution to the founding of the organisation and the influence of her feminism in the early years of its existence.³¹ Despite Hunt only starting her study in 1884, when Helen was at the point of leaving, she fails to mention the part

²⁶ E.P. Lawrence, *Henry George in the British Isles* (Michigan, 1957).

²⁷ Willard Wolfe, *From Radicalism to Socialism: men and ideas in the formation of Fabian socialist doctrines, 1881-1889*, (Yale, 1975), p. 84.

²⁸ Roy Douglas, *Land, People and Politics: A History of the Land Question in the United Kingdom 1878-1952* (London, 1976).

²⁹ Wolfe, *From Radicalism to Socialism*, p. 77.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 45 & 86.

³¹ Karen Hunt, *Equivocal Feminists: The Social Democratic Federation and the Women Question 1884-1911* (Cambridge, 1996).

Helen was still playing in the party at that time or her argument with the overbearing Hyndman. Helen's only inclusion in the book is in a table of executive members of the organisation in 1885, when she had, in fact, ceased to be an executive member. Hunt does point out that no woman was on the executive of the SDF between 1886 and 1894 but ignores the most prominent feminist in the organisation up to 1885.³²

The rise of women's history has led to numerous studies of women's suffrage and of the various nineteenth century women's groups. In these accounts Helen is a controversial figure, blamed for failures and conflicts within the feminist movement and there, in 1867, the historiography on Helen ends.³³ Her work for women's suffrage within the political groups she joined after leaving the suffrage movement receives no attention. The conclusions which these historians reached - without their taking into account any political reasons for the ructions - are usually that Helen had a difficult personality (e.g. A. Robson, Holton and Worzala).³⁴ Holton does briefly mention that Helen's involvement with the Irish question was a cause of strain in her relations with the suffrage movement but gives no explanation as to why this should have been so.³⁵

Helen has been given some attention in the literature on the London School Board, yet her achievements have often gone unrecognised and more emphasis has been placed on her intransigence and inability to compromise. This, though a valid partial assessment, does not reveal the whole story of her influence and work. Hollis

³² *Ibid*, p. 40.

³³ Jane Rendell, 'Who was Lily Maxwell?' in June Purvis & Sandra Holton (eds), *Votes for Women* (London, 2000), chapter 3.

³⁴ See Ann Robson, 'The Founding of the National Society for Women's Suffrage,' *Canadian Journal of History* vol. 8 (1) (Saskatchewan, 1973); Sandra Holton, *Suffrage Days* (London, 1996); Diane Worzala, *The Lanham Place Circle*, (Wisconsin, Madison, 1974).

³⁵ Holton, *Suffrage Days*, p. 59.

concentrates on this aspect of Helen's nine years on the London School Board, maintaining, unfairly, as this thesis will show, that she used her position in society mainly for her own advantage.³⁶ Martin's study of women members of the London School Board offers a more positive assessment of this privileged position of Helen. Martin concludes that all the ladies on the Board had privileged backgrounds, which, as this thesis will show, enabled them to negotiate the prevailing separate spheres ideology.³⁷ Hollis claims that Helen was 'parent centred' in her School Board policies, rather than 'child centred,' citing as an example her opposition to corporal punishment as an infringement of parental rather than children's rights. That view will be contested in this work, which will illustrate how Helen championed the rights of working-class children, both male and female, to receive an education which would allow them to take their rightful place in democracy. The only limitations to their future life opportunities should, she believed, be the limitations of their own intelligence.³⁸ Hollis concludes that Helen achieved little in her educational work because of her own intransigence and inability to build alliances, comparing her unfavourably with Annie Besant. Besant, however, joined the Board later, when the policies for which Helen had fought unsuccessfully, in particular free education, had gained acceptance among the members; the groundwork had been done by predecessors such as Helen.

This study will not attempt to deny that Helen was often a difficult personality. Hollis, however, ignores Helen's politics when examining her fraught relationship with the official Liberals on the Board, concentrating solely on personality as the

³⁶ Patricia Hollis, *Ladies Elect: Women in English Local Government* (Oxford 1989), p. 92.

³⁷ Jane Martin, *Women and the Politics of Schooling in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Leicester, 1989), p. 53.

³⁸ Hollis, *Ladies Elect*, p. 97.

cause of the tensions. Martin, although making no detailed analysis of Helen, recognises that Helen's intransigence on the School Board often resulted from her socialism and she believes that Helen failed to get the credit she deserved because she challenged the male political establishment with her too overtly feminist and radical politics.³⁹ Martin concludes that Helen's inability to compromise led to her not achieving much during her nine years on the Board for the working class whom she served.⁴⁰ This negative conclusion will be challenged in these chapters. In concentrating on the extent of gender solidarity amongst the women members Martin ignores the alliances women like Helen made with male colleagues, such as with the ex-Chartist Benjamin Lucraft, George Mitchell and her fellow Democratic Federation member, Edward Aveling, in the pursuit of her socialist policies.

That focus on the gender divide and how the women negotiated a space for themselves on the male-dominated Board, though important, should not ignore how men and women of radical politics cooperated, as members of public bodies, in order to obtain their socialist objectives. This thesis will examine how men and women resisted *together* the gendered nature of such organisations as the London School Board. Men like Benjamin Lucraft supported many of the resolutions of the radical women members - Helen, Florence Fenwick Miller and Elizabeth Surr - and their attempts to oppose the inner circle of males who wielded all the power in this elected public body. Van Arsdell, the biographer of Helen's School Board colleague, Florence Fenwick Miller, draws her assessment of Helen mainly from Hollis' work, again giving no analysis as to how politics, in addition to her personality, would

³⁹ Martin, *Women and the Politics of Schooling in Victorian and Edwardian Britain*, p. 44.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

have made Helen antagonistic to many on the School Board.⁴¹ She does, however, depict the friendship between the two women but gives it too much importance and does not chart its decline.

The Irish and American Ladies' Land Leagues have begun to receive attention from Irish and American historians, whose aim has been to reinsert women into the historical narrative of Irish nationalism (e.g. Coulter).⁴² Such studies are incomplete without a critical account of Helen Taylor's leadership of the Ladies' Land League of Great Britain and her political agency during the Land War, neither of which has hitherto received attention from British historians.

Helen's anti-imperial feminism, informed by Irish nationalism, chiefly explains her conflicts with her fellow British suffragists. Without exploring the political ideology which must have been at the heart of the discord, historians have underplayed Helen's considerable political achievements. Light has been shed on the conflicts between Helen and her colleagues in the Women's Suffrage movement in Margaret Ward's study of English imperial feminism and how it differed from Irish nationalist feminism.⁴³ By studying Anna Parnell's attempts to revolutionise Irish nationalist feminists through involvement with the Ladies' Land League, Ward reveals the complicated relationship between feminism, unionism and nationalism and illustrates how Irish feminism developed differently from imperialist British feminism. Ward singles out Helen Taylor and Jessie Craigen as English women who supported the former and rejected the latter. Jane Côté, in her biography of the Irish

⁴¹ Rosemary T. Van Arsdell, *Florence Fenwick Miller, Victorian Feminist, Journalist and Educator*, (Aldershot, 2001), p. 76.

⁴² Carol Coulter, *The Hidden Tradition: Feminism, Women and Nationalism in Ireland* (Cork, 1993).

⁴³ Margaret Ward, 'Gendering the Union: Imperial Feminism and the Ladies' Land League', *Women's History Review*, 10 (1), (2001), pp. 71 – 92.

nationalist, Anna Parnell, examines the letters between Anna and Helen to evidence that Anna sustained life-long friendships. Coté draws a sympathetic picture of Helen, concluding that she was ‘one of the most remarkable women of her age’⁴⁴ and relates briefly Helen’s unstinting work for the cause of Ireland, depicting a woman of principle and courage. Beverly Schneller also touches on Helen’s important contribution to the Irish Land War in her study of Anna Parnell’s writings and journalism, though here Helen is understandably consigned to footnotes and annotations.⁴⁵ These insights into Helen’s friendships with Anna Parnell, Michael Davitt and the American political theorist Henry George during the Irish Land War do give us an inkling of her political motivation and how she differed from her fellow suffragists. Sandra Stanley Holton makes an interesting but brief comment on Jessie Craigen’s friendship with Helen Taylor during this epoch, though this thesis is in disagreement with the conclusion she came to as to why that friendship ended.⁴⁶

Finally, Evelyn Pugh, whose main academic interest is in John Stuart Mill, covers Helen’s attempt to be the first woman MP.⁴⁷ Pugh inserts a forgotten episode into the historiography with a detailed account of the campaign but portrays Helen as an individualistic ‘political maverick’ rather than rooted in any particular political tradition. Moreover, Pugh ignores Helen’s influential position in society in 1885 and shows no awareness of the radical politics of the era. For example, Pugh claims that Helen’s election manifesto was idiosyncratic when in reality it was clearly that of a member of the SDF and Land Reform groups and would have been recognised as

⁴⁴ Jane M. Coté, *Anna and Fanny Parnell: Ireland’s Patriot Sisters* (London, 1991), p.186.

⁴⁵ Beverly E. Schneller, *Anna Parnell’s Political Journalism: Contents and Texts* (Dublin, 2005).

⁴⁶ Sandra Holton, ‘Silk Dresses and Lavender Kid Gloves: the wayward career of Jessie Craigen’, *Women’s History Review*, vol. 5 (1) (1996).

⁴⁷ Pugh, ‘The First Woman Candidate for Parliament.’

such by voters. Pugh contends, wrongly, that Helen's manifesto would have needed to be explained to the public, particularly her demands for free elementary state education. This study will show that free education had been hotly debated for years by the London School Board and the London electorate would have needed no further clarification. In not recognising that Helen was part of a political belief system Pugh consigns her to the ranks of political eccentrics. Pugh further repeats the claim that Helen and Mill were responsible for divisions in the suffrage movement at the time of Mill's petition to parliament on the subject and the setting up of the London National Suffrage Committee. This work will show how Helen's political agency led to ructions with fellow suffragists while accepting that Helen was not always an easy colleague.

Theoretical influences

This thesis will explore the historical debates concerning Land Reform, Radical Victorian Liberalism, Victorian education, the SDF and Irish nationalism and it will assess the influence of Helen's feminism within these organisations. It will also examine the following concerns of women's history. It will consider why women, such as Helen, have been left out of the historical account when they were active agents of social and political change. Furthermore, it will illustrate how and why Helen was able to negotiate and resist the separate spheres ideology and it will critically assess how encompassing that concept was. Separate spheres attempted to confine women's influence to the private world of home and family. It demanded that the only acceptable public role for respectable women was supporting their men in their political life and undertaking charitable works. This study will evidence how separate spheres as an ideology was only a middle-class ideal which a number of

women were, to varying degrees, able to circumnavigate, resist and negotiate; it will also demonstrate that such women shared a number of social factors which enabled them to do so. Amanda Vickery has challenged the notion of separate spheres as ‘the organizing concept in the history of middle class women’, asserting that Victorian women’s lives are not so easily defined.⁴⁸ Vickery criticises the defining work on the ideology by Davidoff and Hall which, whilst admitting that many women’s lives were more complex than the ‘angel in the home’ concept would allow, still defends the theory as the overarching constraint for Victorian women.⁴⁹ This thesis evidences the truth of Vickery’s analysis that ‘women were not necessarily imprisoned in a rigidly defined private sphere’⁵⁰ but rather led diverse lives. It will, however, show how political organisations were gendered and what this meant for Helen’s experience within them. This study will thereby demonstrate how she challenged, resisted and at times acquiesced in the expectations of what it was to be a woman. Yet she could on occasion use the gendered social construct, based on a belief in the innate moral superiority of women, to her own advantage. For example, this study will show how Helen supported the advancement of women in the teaching profession as head teachers on the grounds that their moral superiority over men fitted them to do the job better. This thesis will also reference intersectionality theory to show that, although Helen faced discrimination on grounds of her sex in the gendered world of Victorian political life, she was privileged by her ethnicity, religion and social status, by her network of radical family and friends and by the fact she was unmarried, with a personal fortune. These

⁴⁸ Amanda Vickery, ‘Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A review of the categories and chronology of English women’s history’, p. 75, in Sue Morgan (ed.), *The Feminist History Reader* (Abingdon, 2006), chapter 3.

⁴⁹ Vickery’s assessment in ‘Golden Age to Separate Spheres?’, in Leonore Davidoff & Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* (London, 2002), p. 76.

advantages enabled her to challenge and resist the dominant social ideology of women consigned to the home. Was not the male animosity Helen encountered within, for example, the London School Board, not a new phenomenon rising from the emergence of the middle classes after the Industrial Revolution but rather patriarchy, which had been in existence for centuries and endures to this day? In addition, the work will illustrate how the women's suffrage movement was imperialist in nature and the ways in which Helen's international, non-imperial feminism led to conflicts with her fellow suffragists. Moreover, it will assess how far these were the result of Helen's politics rather than her difficult personality.

Throughout this work the terms 'feminism' and 'feminist' will be employed, since these are now accepted anachronisms used in the historiography of this period.

These words were, however, not in use until the last decade of the nineteenth century and so neither Helen nor any of her contemporaries would have referred to their ideas as feminism or to themselves as feminists. They would have used the term 'women's suffrage' and referred to themselves as 'suffragists.'

2. Helen's Formative Years

This chapter will give the background to Helen's feminism and political beliefs from 1876 - the year she entered public life. The aim is to enable an understanding of the background of her motivations in later life. It will briefly examine the experiences which forged her political stance. As this thesis concludes that Helen essentially remained fixed in her political outlook as a mid-century radical it is important to establish how her feminism and politics were informed by the feminism and political philosophy of her mother and step-father. This section will look briefly at her early life and the influences on it, her short time as an actress, and her early work for women's suffrage. Until 1876 she had been known on the public stage only for her work with her step-father, John Stuart Mill, in promoting women's suffrage. It was during this suffrage campaigning that the first seeds were sown of her reputation as a difficult person to work with, but this chapter will show that the tensions in the British suffrage movement were political from the outset and that disagreements were therefore inevitable, not simply the result of forceful, intransigent personalities like Helen and her fellow suffragist Lydia Becker. The focus of this thesis will be on Helen Taylor as a political and social agent from 1876 onwards.

The influences of her early life

Helen Taylor was born in Shoreditch, London on 27 July 1831, the third child and only daughter of Harriet and John Taylor, a wholesale druggist. Her mother was a member of Fox's Unitarian reforming circle, where she had met and fallen in love with the economic philosopher John Stuart Mill in 1830. Mill and Harriet shared an interest in feminism and reform politics and Harriet left her husband for Mill,

though the relationship remained discreet. John Taylor sanctioned an arrangement where Helen and her mother lived alone in Walton, Surrey. This allowed Mill to visit and Helen spent long periods travelling on the continent with her mother and Mill. Harriet and Mill withdrew socially and thus, to avoid the constant interest of acquaintances in their living arrangements, often journeyed in Europe.¹ Relations with Helen's biological father remained good and Helen's adolescent diary records happy visits from her father and paternal grandmother to the house in Walton.² When John Taylor was dying, in 1849, Helen and her mother nursed him and Harriet's letters to Mill during this time show genuine affection for her husband.³ In 1851, two years after her husband's death, and twenty years after first meeting, Harriet and Mill married.

Helen thus had a privileged intellectual development as the constant companion of her feminist mother, who wrote a number of influential essays. The most well-known of these is *The Enfranchisement of Women*, published in 1851. In this work Harriet called for equality for women in employment opportunity, education and the law; she argued that women's subordination was not innate but rather a result of society's expectations of what it was to be born male or female. She argued as evidence for this that gender expectations differed across cultures and periods of history. She understood, therefore, what many have taken to be a more modern theory, that gender is socially constructed. Harriet worked closely with Mill in his political writings and he based his *Subjugation of Women* on his wife's earlier work.

¹ For an account of Harriet and Mill's relationship see F.A. Hayek, *John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor: Their Friendship and Subsequent Marriage* (London, 1951).

² Helen's diaries, MTC, file 44. For instance she recorded on 12 February, 1842 that 'papa came'; there are various other visits recorded in her diaries.

³ See MTC, file 7 and Hayek, *John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor: Their Friendship and Subsequent Marriage*, p. 81.

Harriet has been credited with radicalising Mill with her socialist feminism.⁴ He himself admitted his debt to both his wife and step-daughter in his *Autobiography*, published by Helen after his death, in which he credits his writings as the work of three equals, himself, Harriet and Helen.⁵

Helen might have been raised in an intellectual environment, but it appears to have been fairly isolated. Her diaries in the Mill Taylor Collection show her only close friend to have been one of her brothers, Algernon, to whom she remained devoted. Her other brother, Herbert, seems to have been estranged from his mother and siblings quite early on. Helen recorded later in life that she felt he had behaved badly to Harriet and that she could not forgive him for this:

...a man whose very name brings to my memory with an undying pang all that he inflicted on my beloved mother and the shadow that his heartlessness cast upon my youth...Bad son, bad brother and now it would seem bad husband and bad father.⁶

The social isolation Helen experienced during her childhood and adolescence goes some way to explaining the lack of social tact during her public life that will be explored within this work, though it will also be emphasised that much of the tensions between Helen and her fellow British suffragists were political. Helen lived constantly at her mother's side and the letters between them in the Mill-Taylor archive show a great affection and Harriet seems to have had high expectations of young Helen. Helen confided to her friend Lady Amberley that her mother had been 'a severe critic' of her writings, which had often made her wish that Mill had not

⁴ See for example, Ann Robson and John M. Robson (eds), *Sexual Equality, Writings by John Stuart Mill, Harriet Taylor Mill and Helen Taylor* (Toronto, 1994).

⁵ John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* (London, 1873), p. 224.

⁶ Draft letter from Helen Taylor to Algernon Taylor, marked '1888 not sent', MTC, file 24, no. 109.

been so lavish in his praise of her output.⁷ Helen's niece Mary Taylor wrote of Helen's abiding resentment that she had never been sent to school:

She often complained that in her childhood she had been too much tied to her mother's side. She had wished to go to school, that she might be prepared for taking an active part in life, but her wishes were not granted. Her mother was somewhat strict, and this made her sometimes say that she had been hard, yet most of her recollections were full of affectionate admiration.⁸

Mary felt that it was for convention's sake that Helen had not been sent to school; her constant presence as her mother's companion safeguarded Harriet's reputation when Mill visited them. Helen was self-educated, being allowed to read anything she wanted to. She would read all the books on the bookshelf, starting at one end until she reached the other, though not always understanding what she had read. She read Berkeley at the age of eleven and Mill's *Logic* when she was fourteen. Her favourite author was Thomas a Kempis. She was never taught to believe anything but expected to judge for herself.⁹ The Unitarian belief that education should involve a process of rational enquiry would seem to have been at the heart of Helen's intellectual training and the importance given by Unitarians to public duty will be seen in the strenuous public life Helen led in her middle age.¹⁰ She owed her mind-set to mid nineteenth-century Unitarianism. At fourteen she also read the feminist Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, first published in 1792, which led Helen to exclaim in her diary:

⁷ Helen Taylor to Lady Amberley, 11 September 1869, in Bertrand Russell & Patricia Russell, (eds), *The Amberley Papers*, vol. 2 (London, 1937), p. 312.

⁸ Mary Taylor's introduction in E. Hugh S. R. Eliot, *The Letters of John Stuart Mill* (London, 1910), p. xiii.

⁹ Helen Taylor to Lady Amberley, 20 February 1865, in Bertrand Russell & Patricia Russell (eds), *The Amberley Papers*, vol. 1 (London, 1932), p. 372.

¹⁰ On Unitarianism see Kathryn Gleadle, *The Early Feminists: Radical Unitarians and the Emergence of the Women's Rights Movement* (Basingstoke, 1995). Gleadle cites the Unitarian circle of William Fox, where Harriet met Mill, as of fundamental importance in the development of nineteenth-century feminism. Gleadle cites the Unitarian emphasis on the importance of public duty as a fundamental tenet of Unitarian belief. Unitarians were, however, doctrinally diverse. Their only common belief was that Jesus was not the son of God.

Why do people not write now? Why is there neither man nor woman who dares to say his or her opinions openly and so that all may know it.¹¹

Though she has been dismissed in the historiography as ‘a precocious self-willed child dominated by a self-centred mother’, Helen’s diaries show her to be a sensitive, intellectual adolescent, with a mind open to beauty and spirituality.¹² The most striking aspect of her diaries is the religious freedom she was given. This applied to all the Taylors, her mother and Algernon often attending mass. Unitarians were against organised religion but Helen and her family were greatly attracted to Catholicism for the beauty of the liturgy, the ceremony and music.¹³ Helen and Algernon often performed mass at home for themselves and had an altar which they decorated at Christmas.¹⁴ The diaries record regular mass attendance at home in Surrey and when travelling abroad; ten years later, as an actress in Newcastle, Helen was still going to mass regularly.¹⁵ She was not always content to be a mere observer, going up to kiss the cross during one Good Friday service as fervently as any Catholic present.¹⁶ She later wrote to Lady Amberley on the subject of Catholicism:

Politically one cannot too much detest Catholicism but socially and personally I must admit that many of the nicest people I have known have been Catholics. There is so much that is exquisitely beautiful and touching in Catholicism that I never think anyone quite safe from becoming a Catholic.¹⁷

The suffragist Florence Fenwick Miller claimed in her memoirs that Helen converted to Catholicism at the end of her life. This claim was made earlier by Ernest Belfont Bax of the SDF; but such claims cannot be substantiated and in any

¹¹ Diary, MTC, file 24, 22 January 1845.

¹² This assessment is made in Ann Robson, ‘The Founding of the National Society for Women’s Suffrage 1866-1867’, *Canadian Journal of History* vol. 8, no. 1, March 1973 (Saskatchewan, 1973).

¹³ MTC, file 44.

¹⁴ Diary, 22 December 1845, ‘I have been decorating my altar with green and holly’, MTC, file 44.

¹⁵ See letters from Helen to Harriet in MTC, file 51.

¹⁶ Diaries, MTC, file 44.

¹⁷ Helen Taylor to Lady Amberley, 11 September 1869, in Russell & Russell (eds.), *The Amberley Papers* vol. 2 (London, 1937), p. 312.

case Helen spent the last years of her life suffering from dementia and was thus mentally confused. Perhaps if she did convert, it was in a mind remembering only the pleasures of her youth, while her political mind, which would have prevented her from converting, was clouded by illness.¹⁸

Independence as an actress

Helen's mother may have been domineering but for a short period Helen succeeded in her ambition to be an actress. Her diaries reveal her adolescent interest in drama. She put on plays with her brother Algernon at home and she later took acting lessons from the actress Fanny Stirling.¹⁹ Despite her mother's misgivings she succeeded in obtaining small parts in repertory theatres in the north of England and Scotland, under the stage name of Miss Trevor. On these occasions her brother travelled with her, though she was left in lodgings on her own when he returned south.²⁰ This shows that Helen had a freedom of movement and an independence of mind from an early age. Her mother was against the venture, as acting was still not a respectable career for a woman in the 1850s. The *English Women's Journal* in January 1859, at the time of Helen's acting career, described the difficulties of the stage as a career for women. It paid little unless you played a lead, and although in some theatres any hint of the immorality that actresses were often thought linked to would result in dismissal, in other theatres, the periodical noted, 'vice is rife.'²¹ No wonder Harriet Taylor feared for Helen's reputation, although by 1859 it was becoming a slightly more accepted profession for women. The *English Women's*

¹⁸ See Florence Fenwick Miller, *An Uncommon Girlhood*, unpublished memoir, and E. Belfort Bax, *Reminiscences and Reflections of a mid and late Victorian* (London, 1918).

¹⁹ See correspondence between them in MTC, file 23.

²⁰ See correspondence between Helen and Harriet, MTC, file 54.

²¹ *The English Women's Journal*, January 1859.

Review article was positive about it being an acceptable career choice for girls and portrayed it as an industrious and legitimate profession.

Helen's acting career was, however, to be short-lived. In November 1859 her mother died in Avignon, whilst travelling with Mill abroad in search of a climate to help her diseased lungs. Helen left the Aberdeen theatre where she was working to be by Mill's side. She would remain there as his companion until his death in 1873, his dear 'Lily', as he always called her.²² Most importantly she would be his intellectual collaborator and this is where her public life with him began. The historiography has recognised the close working relationship Mill formed with his step-daughter and that she wrote many of his letters. Sometimes he made changes to the drafts or added paragraphs, at other times he copied her drafts into his own hand. It has also been recognised that Mill wrote *The Subjugation of Women* in collaboration with Helen, basing it on her mother's earlier work *The Enfranchisement of Women*.²³ In his *Autobiography* he asserts that it was Helen who suggested the essay and that she had written parts of it.²⁴

Collaboration with John Stuart Mill

This thesis will evidence that Helen stayed loyal to Mill's mid-century political philosophy and regarded her work as a continuation of his. Such devotion is hardly surprising. She was much more than his disciple or apprentice; she was, in his mind, his intellectual equal. 'Surely,' he wrote, referring to the death of Harriet and of

²² The final illness and death of Harriet and Helen's decision to leave Aberdeen to be by Mill's side are recorded in letters between Harriet, Mill, Helen and Algernon in MTC, file 24.

²³ See M.S. Packe, *The Life of John Stuart Mill* (London, 1967).

²⁴ Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 223.

Helen subsequently coming to live and work with him, ‘no one ever before was so fortunate after such a loss as mine, to draw another prize in the lottery of life.’²⁵

Mill and Helen lived half the year in Avignon and half in their house in Blackheath, on the edge of London. However in 1865 Mill was elected as an MP, which meant he had to spend more time in London. This would allow Helen to join and influence the feminist circles of London and result in the collaboration for which Mill and Helen Taylor are remembered in the historiography: that of the campaign waged for women’s suffrage around the thwarted 1866 Reform Bill and the 1867 Reform Act.

The most important feminist group in London of the 1860s was the Langham Place Circle set up by Barbara Bodichon and Bessie Rayner Parkes in 1859. This campaigned for women in the fields of suffrage, employment, education and the law. Out of this developed the Kensington Society, 1865-6, a discussion group for women who were interested in educational, political and social topics; it was attended by most of the Langham Place feminists. It was Alice Westlake, later a School Board colleague of Helen’s, who recruited Helen to this group on her return to England after Mill’s election triumph.²⁶ Helen’s membership of the group has been recognised as pivotal in bringing Mill into contact with suffragists.²⁷ Leading women campaigners began to dine regularly with Helen and Mill in Blackheath, including Millicent Fawcett, Elizabeth Garrett and Lady Amberley.²⁸ Helen was to

²⁵ Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 224.

²⁶ Diane Worzala, *The Langham Place Circle* (Wisconsin, Madison, 1974), pp. 283-4.

²⁷ Robson and Robson (eds.), *Sexual Equality, Writings by John Stuart Mill, Harriet Taylor Mill and Helen Taylor*, p. xxvi.

²⁸ Helen wrote to Elizabeth Garrett on 9 June 1866 asking her to dine with them so she could meet Lady Amberley, who was interested in her plans to open the medical profession to women. Mill and Helen were thus facilitators in allowing feminist women to meet and network. Autograph Letters, Women’s Library.

form a close friendship with Kate Amberley until the latter's death in 1874 and become godmother to her last child, the future philosopher, Bertrand Russell.²⁹ Mill was his godfather though Bertrand was only a year old when Mill died in 1873 and he lost his mother the next year.

Frances Power Cobbe was also invited regularly to dine at the Mill house in Blackheath and Helen gave her the proof sheet of Mill's essay on religion.³⁰

The feminists of the Kensington Society gravitated to the new arrivals from France. Helen wrote a discussion paper for the group, 'What are the Subjects on Which it is Desirable to lay the Greatest Stress in the Education of Women', in which she called for equality of educational opportunity for girls in the school curriculum.³¹ Boys and girls should be taught the same subjects. This strongly-held view will be seen later in this thesis to have informed one of her major campaigns as a London School Board member. Helen also had feminist articles published. 'The Ladies' Petition' appeared in the *Westminster Review* in January 1867, though it did not appear over her name. This was not unusual. Many articles in the publication were unsigned. The article was so popular that Helen republished it under her name as a pamphlet in 1867 entitled *The Claim of Englishwomen to the Suffrage Constitutionally Considered*.³² In her published articles she watered down her demands for suffrage for all qualified women and accepted that it was only politically possible to claim the vote for single women at this moment in time.³³ In September 1866 *Macmillan's*

²⁹ Helen Taylor to Lady Amberley, 1 July 1872 in Russell & Russell, (eds.) *The Amberley Papers* vol. 2, p. 495.

³⁰ Frances Power Cobbe, *Frances Power Cobbe: As told by herself* (London, 1904), p. 411.

³¹ Reprinted in Robson and Robson (eds.), *Sexual Equality, Writings by John Stuart Mill, Harriet Taylor Mill and Helen Taylor*, pp. 112-16.

³² Accessed online at <http://www.indiana.edu/letrs.vwwwp/taylor/suffrage>.

³³ See discussion on Helen's literary output in Andrea L. Bloomfield, 'Walking a Narrow Line: Helen Taylor's Literary Contribution to the British Women's Rights Movement', *Women's Studies*, vol. 26, (1997), pp. 259-83.

Magazine published 'Women and Criticism', in which she argued against the social and legal constraints on women in society. This appeared signed only with her initials HT.³⁴

There is no doubt that from the outset of her political campaigning, which would later embrace land reform, education reform and Home Rule for Ireland, Helen put her feminism as her pivotal motivation:

There is no other misery left in this world equal to the misery of wretched women and to fight against it is the greatest work of our generation.³⁵

In 1866 the Liberal Reform Bill was introduced by the Prime Minister, Lord John Russell. Helen wrote to her fellow Kensington Society member, Barbara Bodichon, suggesting a petition to Parliament in favour of women being included in this suffrage reform bill. 'If a tolerably numerous petition can be got up, my father will gladly undertake to present it.'³⁶ She told Barbara that she did not expect it would succeed in winning women the suffrage but it would be the start of a campaign. The petition obtained over 14,000 signatures and when it was ready Helen instructed Barbara to send it to Mill at the Houses of Parliament so that he could present it.³⁷ The 1866 bill was defeated in the Commons and the Tories took power and introduced the 2nd Reform Act in 1867. On 20 May 1867, when Mill moved his unsuccessful amendment to the Tory reform bill in the House of Commons, he called for the word *person* to be substituted for the word *man*. This would have

³⁴ *Ibid.* *The Ladies' Petition* is reprinted on pp. 216-33 and *Women and Criticism* on pp. 103-111.

³⁵ Helen Taylor to Lady Amberley, 13 February 1868, in Russell & Russell, (eds.) *The Amberley Papers* vol. 2, p. 102.

³⁶ Helen Taylor to Barbara Bodichon, 9 May 1866, *Autograph letters*, 7.bmc/3/8f1646, Women's Library.

³⁷ Helen Taylor to Barbara Bodichon, 6 June 1866, *Autograph letters*, 7.bmc/b2, Women's Library.

given women the vote on the same qualifying terms as men.³⁸ The amendment was defeated by 196 votes to 73 and the 1867 Act extended the suffrage to one in three men.³⁹

The Manchester Suffrage Committee had been formed in 1866 by Lydia Becker and in 1867 the London National Society for Women's Suffrage was created. Historians have blamed Helen and Mill's uncompromising and autocratic leadership for ultimately splitting this new campaigning organisation. Diane Worzala blames the split in the London suffrage society on Helen's 'prickly personality', completely ignoring the conflicting ideologies at the centre of the strife.⁴⁰ The historian Alan Robson also ignores political ideology; he blames the split in the suffrage movement on Helen's personality and cites Mill's death and Helen's other campaigning interests as the catalyst for Millicent Fawcett having been able to unite the movement.⁴¹ There was no doubt that Mill and Taylor attempted to keep a tight control over the running of the group but their aim was political; this was not simply an instance of autocratic behaviour. Historians have written on the political divisions within the group that could not be overcome. Conservatives such as Emily Davies and Frances Power Cobbe wished to exclude married women from the suffrage against the wishes of the Liberals, including Mill, Helen and Clementia Taylor. Mill and Helen, therefore, found it easier to work with the Liberals of the Manchester Suffrage Society, though conflict with Lydia Becker, who led the

³⁸ 'The Admission of Women to the Electoral Suffrage', speech reprinted in Robson and Robson (eds.), *Sexual Equality, Writings by John Stuart Mill, Harriet Taylor Mill and Helen Taylor*, p. xxvi.

³⁹ Martin Pugh, 'The Liberal Party and Women's Suffrage 1866-1918', *Journal of Liberal History*, no. 67, Spring 2009, pp. 17-22.

⁴⁰ D. Worzala, *The Langham Place Circle*, p. 293.

⁴¹ Alan P.W. Robson, 'The Founding of the National Society for Women's Suffrage,' *Canadian Journal of History* vol. 8, no. 1, March 1973, p. 213.

northern group, resulted in the latter severing relations with London.⁴² Barbara Caine has noted the political diversity of the women who formed the first executive of the London National Society for Women's Suffrage and the difficulties experienced by conservatives like Frances Power Cobbe and Emily Davies, who were only prepared to campaign for single women to be given the vote.⁴³ Helen and Mill also wanted a women-only committee for the group, which Helen explained thus to Barbara Bodichon:

But to admit men into the governing body is merely to give over the whole credit into their hands, leaving women in their unusual and proper subordinate condition.⁴⁴

Barbara replied that she could not agree to this request because she felt that a women-only committee would set back women's suffrage for twenty years and that Clementia Taylor was in favour of men being included and 'so are all the other women.'⁴⁵

There is no doubt that personalities clashed but it is also important to recognise that there were political differences which played their part in the split when the women of the English Women's Review left the London Suffrage group in the hands of Helen, Mill and Clementia Taylor.⁴⁶ This thesis will reveal that although Helen could be a very difficult person to work with, it was by no means the sole reason for the conflict she had with other feminists. It will be evidenced that they feared her extreme politics.

⁴² Sandra Stanley Holton, 'Women and the Vote' in June Purvis (ed.), *Women's History: Britain 1850-1944* (London, 1995), chapter 11, p. 281.

⁴³ Barbara Caine, *Victorian Feminism* (Oxford 1992), pp. 85, 113.

⁴⁴ Helen Taylor to Barbara Bodichon, 10 June 1866, *Autograph Letters*, 7/bmc/bc, Women's Library.

⁴⁵ Undated letter, Barbara Bodichon to Helen Taylor, MTC, file 12, no. 54.

⁴⁶ Sandra Stanley Holton, Women and the Vote in June Purvis (ed.), *Women's History: Britain 1850-1944* (London, 1995), chapter 11, pp. 281-2.

An interesting fact about Helen in this early stage of her career was her lack of confidence in public. It will be seen later that she became a popular, confident and extremely effective speaker, greatly sought after by organisers of public meetings in her various causes because she attracted large audiences. When she gave what appears to have been her first major speech at a London suffrage meeting in 1870 she confided to Lady Amberley that ‘the affair of the speech is such a gigantic enterprise to me,’ and that she would much rather not appear on the public stage.⁴⁷ It is from this public appearance that we have a description of Helen aged 38 by the suffragist Catherine Winkworth, who attended the meeting:

Miss Helen Taylor made a most remarkable speech. She is a slight young woman with long, thin, delicate features, clear dark eyes and dark hair, which she wears in long bands on her cheeks, fashionably dressed in slight mourning, speaks off the platform in a high, thin voice, very shyly with an embarrassed air, on the platform she was really eloquent.⁴⁸

From 1868, following the loss of Mill’s parliamentary seat in that year’s general election, Mill and Helen returned to living most of the year in Avignon until Mill’s sudden death in 1873. They welcomed their release from London society. Helen wrote to George Grote, saying that although she had encouraged Mill to stand again in the 1868 election they were both pleased to have their freedom restored when he was not returned by the electorate.⁴⁹ In Avignon they collaborated on political and social writings and Helen prepared the *Posthumous Works of Thomas Buckle*, the historian, for publication. They continued to work for women’s suffrage, though tensions between them and sections of the movement remained. In 1872 Helen

⁴⁷ Helen Taylor to Lady Amberley, 5 March 1870 and 21 March 1870, Amberley Letters, Bertrand Russell Archive Ontario.

⁴⁸ Catherine Winkworth to Emily Winkworth, 3 March 1870, in Margaret J. Shaen (ed.), Susanna and Catherine Winkworth, *Memories of Two Sisters* (London, 1908), p. 275.

⁴⁹ Helen Taylor to George Grote, 25 September 1868, Eliot, *The Letters of John Stuart Mill*, p.254.

complained to Lady Amberley that the new Central Committee (for women's suffrage) 'consists very largely of rash people whose judgement and prudence cannot be trusted.'⁵⁰

Helen worked with Mill in his last years on his opposition to the Contagious Diseases Acts and she would continue to oppose them, until they were repealed in 1886, through her later work with the Moral Reform Union. Three Acts were passed in Britain, in 1864, 1866 and 1869, as an attempt to improve the health of the army. In 1871 the Acts were extended to India. Women who were suspected of being prostitutes could be forcibly examined for evidence of venereal disease and detained in hospital against their will if they were found to be infected. If they resisted examination they could be imprisoned. Harriet Martineau had been one of the first to raise her voice in protest in 1863 and in 1869 the National Association against the Acts had been created by Josephine Butler.

In 1870 Helen wrote to Lady Amberley that she had been to two meetings called in protest against the legislation and that she had read both the House of Commons and the House of Lords reports on them.⁵¹ Mill gave evidence to The Royal Commission set up to examine the working of the Acts in 1871, where he opposed them on the grounds of personal liberty, which it removed 'from all women'.⁵² He argued that the men frequenting the brothels should be forced to undergo medical examination if the state insisted on examining women, though he remained fundamentally against the Acts. Opposition to the Acts was a feminist issue for Mill and Helen. A

⁵⁰ Helen Taylor to Lady Amberley, 21 March 1872, MTC, file 19, no. 54.

⁵¹ Helen Taylor to Lady Amberley, 12 April 1870, Bertrand Russell Archives, Canada.

⁵² J. S. Mill, 'The Contagious Diseases Act 1871,' in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. XXI, online at [oll/libertyfund.org/](http://oll.libertyfund.org/) p. 4.

draft letter from Mill in 1870, written by Helen, protested at the Acts as an affront to women's rights. The legislation was 'utterly depraving to the mass of the population (not to speak of the gross inequality between men and women).'⁵³ Helen had thus served an apprenticeship with her step-father for her later work in the 1880s on repeal of the Acts.

Helen's anti-imperialism

This introductory chapter has briefly examined the influences which informed the feminism and political outlook of Helen Taylor, which will be in the subsequent chapters. It has attempted to show that Helen was always politically motivated and that this would be the major factor in her disagreements with many in the suffrage movement and the Liberal Party during the 1880s in particular. Antoinette Burton has dismissed the British suffrage movement as imperialist in nature, accusing them *per se* of demanding their rights as women in terms of support for the British Empire, in which they demanded equal citizenship.⁵⁴ In the conclusion of this work it will be argued, as a corrective to that assessment, that there were other forms of feminism, of which Helen is an example. A non-imperial feminism existed which did not regard the Anglo-Saxon race as the pinnacle of civilisation. This too was part of Helen's intellectual heritage. In 1865 Governor Eyre put down a riot in Jamaica with a great deal of brutality. Eyre had a member of the Jamaican House of Assembly hanged, 600 men and women flogged and 1,000 huts burnt. Reaction to this split British Society. Carlyle and many others defended Eyre and formed an Eyre Defence Committee whilst Mill was on the opposing Committee calling for

⁵³ J.S. Mill to W. Malleson, 18 January 1870, cited in H.S.R. Elliot (ed.), *Letters of John Stuart Mill*, p. 238. William Malleson was the Hon Sec of the Social Purity Alliance during Helen's time in the MRU (see *The Pioneer*, the newspaper of the SPU).

⁵⁴ Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History* (Chapel Hill, 1994), chapter 3, pp. 63-96.

him to be prosecuted.⁵⁵ Helen was appalled at the brutality of Eyre against the Jamaican people and that it should be supported back home in England:

The Jamaican atrocities seem to me the natural consequence of those committed in India. Public opinion applauded those and so encouraged English people to fall back into the savagery and barbarism which is natural to all who don't cultivate anything better.⁵⁶

Helen, from the outset, unlike many women suffragists, never believed in the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race. This will be seen in her public life throughout this thesis. She continued in her letter to Mrs Grote that Eyre had 'an inflated idea of his own consequence and value, and that of other white people like himself, to be maintained at all risks.'

A further example of their lack of a sense of Anglo-Saxon superiority towards people and places abroad is illustrated by the travels that Mill and Helen undertook together in the early 1860s. The historian Ann Robson made a study of them to show how unlike the average Anglo-Saxon tourists they were.⁵⁷ This is further evidence that Helen was always committed to distancing herself from ideas of racial superiority. Helen and Mill travelled throughout Europe, collecting specimen plants, as Mill was an amateur botanist. Helen had a room built in the house at Avignon for Mill's plants and botanical books.⁵⁸ In January 1862 they set off for a six months expedition which saw them travel through France and Italy, Greece and Turkey. In Italy they attended a session of the Italian Parliament and when they reached Greece they did not take the usual tourist trail of their fellow Britons, which would have

⁵⁵ Catherine Hall, *White, Male and Middle Class* (Cambridge 1992), p. 265.

⁵⁶ Helen Taylor to Mrs Grote, 20 December 1865, in Russell & Russell (eds.), *The Amberley Papers* vol. 1, p. 430.

⁵⁷ Ann Robson, 'Travels with a Donkey,' *Queen's Quarterly* vol. 101, part 2, 1974, pp. 319-43.

⁵⁸ John Stuart Mill to W. R. Thornton (though the letter has been identified as having been written by Helen), 16 January 1869; Eliot, (ed.), *The Letters of John Stuart Mill*, p. 54.

involved staying in inns and private houses. Helen had herself designed the three tents that she purchased; she wrote to Fanny Stirling of how this enabled them in Greece to travel off the tourists' beaten track. Helen believed they were the first travellers to camp out in the region.⁵⁹ The Greek government gave them soldiers to travel with them, so that they would not get attacked by brigands, and they had guides and servants to look after the mules and horses. In this way they travelled three months in Greece and then crossed to Constantinople by sea. They continued their travels around Turkey, seeing places other tourists could not travel to, accessible only to Mill and Helen because they were prepared to live in tents. Robson uses these travels as an example of how Mill and Taylor were so unlike most British travellers in that they were not convinced of their own cultural superiority but showed 'fortitude and civility' when travelling abroad.⁶⁰

In 1873 Mill died, leaving Helen lonely and distraught. She had lost both her mother and adored step-father but they had left her an intellectual legacy which she used in her chosen political and social causes. These campaigns form the following chapters. In addition, Helen was left the things which facilitated her entry into political world: her step-father's social contacts, the prestige of being his step-daughter and a considerable fortune left by him to her in his will. The following examination of her life's work and campaigning will show how she used these privileges to good effect to fight for a wider and more moral democracy in Great Britain and Ireland, to improve state education for the working class and to attempt to win better land rights for ordinary working people against the privileges of landlords throughout the British Isles and Ireland. Her public life after the death of

⁵⁹ Robson, 'Travels with a Donkey,' p. 336.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 341.

Mill is testimony to the beliefs and political outlook of her feminist mother and step-father to which she strove to stay true for the rest of her life.

3. London School Board, 1876–85

The historiography, which has failed to recognise Helen's achievements on the London School Board from 1876 to 1885, has portrayed her as merely a divisive and difficult personality who achieved little, ignoring, for the most part, the radical nature of her policies which she uncompromisingly followed. Helen was attempting to introduce feminist and socialist policy into London's educational administration. During her membership of the London School Board she was one of its most popular members as far as working-class and radical voters were concerned, being returned top of the poll in her district in 1879 and 1882; and she was seen as a tireless champion of the poorer classes. The policies which she pursued throughout nine years as a Member of the London School Board (MLSB) for Southwark, one of the poorest boroughs of the capital,¹ arose out of her feminist, radical socialism which maintained that a compulsory, state education system would advance democracy in that it would lead to an educated working class fully participating in society. She unfailingly, and without patronising the poor, championed the rights of the working class to a liberal, free and secular education,

... in which neither boys nor girls shall be tied down to any conditions of religion or opinions, nay of a future destiny in life other than for which God has given them faculties... If you retard the education of girls you will not attain liberty for the next generation for the mass of the population of the country.²

Nowhere in her political life is her challenge to the position of women in society and to gender divisions seen so clearly as in the policies she pursued during her time sitting on this important body. This chapter will examine each of the policies she

¹ Charles Booth's *Life and Labour of the People of London*, vol. II *Streets and Population Classified* shows Southwark as having a poverty rate of 67.9 per cent. Although published in 1892, the study began in 1886.

² Helen Taylor's speech at her post-election banquet, as reported in the *Bermondsey and Rotherhithe Advertiser*, 27 January 1877.

was engaged in between 1876 and 1885 to evidence how some radical women put feminist ideas of equality at the heart of the educational legislation that they tried to introduce and how they negotiated the separate spheres ideology of a School Board controlled by an inner caucus of patriarchal men. It will demonstrate how Helen's radicalism, socialism and feminism all informed her political agency on the Board. Her mid-century radicalism was fused with the ideas of the socialist revival of the 1880s and informed her championing of secular, free education and her involvement in charitable endowment reform. That this political stance was intertwined with her feminism will be illustrated by her work in challenging the gendering of education. She repeatedly challenged separate spheres in the curriculum, the teaching profession and the School Board bureaucracy, thus openly defying the ideology of separate lives and specific roles for males and females in society.

Finally this chapter will look at how, although Helen challenged separate spheres, she was able to exploit the dominant idea of women's acceptable nurturing role to justify her campaign against cruelty and corporal punishment in schools. This feminism of sexual difference, using the accepted social mores which held women to be innately morally superior to men, allowed female Board members a political voice in debates and legislation regarding the morality of public spending and tenders, as well as in the exposing of abuses of children within the institutions administered by the London School Board. They spoke as moral guardians of society, which gave their political work in this field acceptability. Thus women obtained political agency for themselves on the Board, sometimes by challenging gender expectations but at other times by working within the accepted Victorian social construct of womanhood.

The London School Board had been created under the 1870 Forster Education Act, which set up a state system of elementary education for children between the ages of five and twelve. A further Act in 1880 made education compulsory up to the age of ten.³ Forster's intention had been to put education in London under the control of the City Corporation, the Boards of Guardians, the Vestries and the District Board of Works; but a successful amendment by the MP for Finsbury, W.M. Torrens, led to the setting up of an elected School Board for London.⁴ Women were eligible both to sit on the Board and to elect its members under the terms of the Municipal Franchise Act of 1869, which gave the local vote to unmarried or widowed women who were ratepayers. The Education Act itself was a compromise between those who wanted a secular state-run elementary school system (most members of the middle classes, the Trades Union Congress and forty Liberal MPs) and the National Education Union (comprising the Anglican Church and the Tory Party), who were defenders of the church school voluntary system. The compromise resulted in an educational system where the voluntary sector was supported financially by the government and existed alongside state-run Board Schools paid for by a levy on local ratepayers and controlled by a locally elected School Board.⁵ The School Boards have been recognised as the first popularly elected public bodies, thus advancing English democracy.⁶

Men and women needed no property or residential qualifications in the division in which they stood as candidates and each ratepayer had as many votes as there were

³ <http://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/school/overview/1870educationact/>

⁴ Thomas Gautrey, *Lux Mihi Laus. School Board Memories* (London, 1936), p.19.

⁵ Summary taken from Jane Martin, 'Fighting down the idea that the only place for women was in the home: Gender and Policy in Elementary Education', *History of Education* vol. 24, no. 4 (London, 1995), p. 278.

⁶ J.S. Hurt, *Elementary Schooling and the Working-classes, 1860–1918* (London, 1979), p. 75.

seats on the Board for that district. Minority interests were upheld because a voter could place all his or her votes on one candidate, a system known as ‘plumbing’, and voting was by secret ballot (except in the City of London ward).⁷ The London School Board’s importance also lies in its having been the first democratically elected body set up by the Government to solve a major social problem in the capital. The voluntary church schools could not, alone, provide for a rapidly growing population.

The School Board was Helen’s first venture into public life, other than women’s suffrage. Her letters to Lady Amberley show she was totally bereft when Mill, whose constant companion and collaborator she had been since the death of her mother in 1859, died in 1873. She wrote numerous letters to Kate Amberley, expressing her grief, despair and loneliness: ‘I do feel solitary – in heart,’ she confided, writing to her from Avignon.⁸ This sorrow was followed by a further emotional blow in 1874 when Kate, her closest friend, died. Friends of the Taylor-Mills in London were the catalysts for rescuing Helen from her solitary exile in France by encouraging her to enter public life. This intervention evidences a Helen who had a lack of confidence but who was helped to the realisation of political agency achieved through concern for others. Helen had spent the majority of each year since Mill’s loss of his parliamentary seat in 1868 at their house in Avignon. Living outside Anglo-Saxon society, she was open to the influence of European ideas, coming to England only a couple of times a year to attend to women’s suffrage business. In October 1876 Eliza Cairnes wrote a letter to Helen, who had

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Helen Taylor to Kate Amberley, 11 May 1873, Bertrand Russell Archive.

been ill, which would change her life. She asked her to consider standing for the London School Board elections:

...it encourages me to hope that you will listen favourably to a proposal I have to make – which is that you will stand for the School Board. I saw Mrs Anderson yesterday and she was talking to me on the subject and wondering if you were properly asked you would consent to stand...Mrs Orme too is of the same opinion and is very anxious that you should become a member of the School Board. She wrote to me about it some time ago.⁹

This was not Helen's first contact with the London School Board. Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, after her election to the Board in 1870, had written to ask whether Mill would consider standing for election and accept the Chairmanship but he had declined.¹⁰

The women's suffrage movement had recognised the importance of the creation of the School Boards in extending opportunities for women in the public sphere. The *English Women's Review* had closely followed the first elections in 1870, quoting John Stuart's Mill's support for women coming forward to sit on the Boards; the publication had celebrated the election of the first three women to the new authorities, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson (London), Emily Davies (London) and Lydia Becker (Manchester).¹¹ The paper gave much coverage to the triennial elections and pressed the case for more women to come forward and seek election.¹² It followed the debates of the London School Board closely, especially as they related to the position of women teachers, their pay and conditions.¹³

⁹ Eliza Cairnes to Helen Taylor, October 1876, MTC, vol. 19, no. 301.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Garrett Anderson to Helen Taylor, 9 December 1870, MTC, vol. 15, no. 54.

¹¹ *The English Woman's Review*, January 1871.

¹² *Ibid.*, December 1876.

¹³ For example *The English Woman's Review*, May 1879, which gave a detailed account of Helen's continuous attempt to achieve pay parity between men and women in the teaching profession.

Helen's political agency – mid-century Taylor-Mill radicalism combined with 1880s socialism

Helen's work on the London School Board and the influence she exercised within it give the lie to the claim by E.J. Hobsbawm that 'women were outside the history of the nineteenth century', since they had no political agency.¹⁴ A detailed examination of Helen's time on the Board illustrates, on the contrary, that she was part of a political tradition. Although she always voted on a policy on its own merits and refused to blindly follow the Liberal whip, she was not a maverick, never making decisions on a whim. Helen would have seen her membership of the Board as a means of advancing the feminist cause. When Helen was elected in November 1876 she was already well versed in radical educational theories. Therefore, Helen's political intransigence on the London School Board can only be understood by recognising that she was more politically to the left than most other members (she joined the Democratic Federation in 1881 as a founder member) but that she also felt it her duty to uphold the teachings of her step-father, with whom she had worked so closely for ten years.

Classic feminism (the feminism of the movement that was fighting for women's rights at this time) had sprung from utilitarianism and restricted itself to the right to vote and to equality in education for boys and girls. It did not concern itself with Victorian economic structures. The limits of most contemporary feminists were, therefore, as Mendas has analysed, the limits of classical utilitarians, with their failure to concern themselves with any economic analysis of inequality in society which the English socialists, the Owenites, had ignored.¹⁵ Helen's feminism had

¹⁴ E.J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire* (London, 1987), p.196.

¹⁵ S. Mendas, *Women in Western Political Philosophy* (Brighton, 1987).

evolved from this. She had been brought up in a family that had admired the socialism of the Owenites. She was steeped, therefore, in pre-Marx radical English socialism. This included an interest in women's rights, which Marxism ignored and which some in the Democratic Federation, including Hyndman, opposed.¹⁶ She added to this an understanding, as a member of the Democratic Federation, that economic change was a necessity if the working classes (men and women) were to participate fully in society. Mill had praised the socialist communities of Saint-Simon, Fourier and Owen for their commitment to sexual equality.¹⁷ These utopian socialists had seen society's problems as principally deriving from organised religion, marriage laws and private property¹⁸ and had tried in their communal living to be more equalitarian, sharing housework and childcare. Education had been a concern in the writings of both Harriet Taylor and Mill; Helen tried to further their ideas and aspirations in the causes she took up on the School Board. Harriet had believed that equality in education between boys and girls would make men and women equal partners in society:

High mental powers in women will be but an exceptional accident, until every career is open to them, and until they, as well as men, are educated for themselves and for the world – not one sex for the other.¹⁹

Helen, in the early 1860s, had echoed these words in a speech to the feminists of the Kensington Society. In this she had called for boys and girls to receive equality in their education, as cited in chapter two.²⁰ Mill had been endlessly involved, in

¹⁶ See Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem* (London, 1983) chapter 3, pp. 57-82.

¹⁷ J.S. Mill, 'Socialism and Sexual Equality' in Ann Robson & John Robson, *Sexual Equality*, (Toronto, 1994), p.153.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 20.

¹⁹ Harriet Taylor Mill, 'The Enfranchisement of Women,' in Robson & Robson, *Sexual Equality*, p.196.

²⁰ Helen Taylor, 'What are the subjects on which it is desirable to lay the greatest stress in the education of women?' in Robson & Robson, *Sexual Equality*, p.112.

writings and meetings, in the debates leading up to the 1870 Education Act during and after his time as an MP. His views were discernible in the debates Helen was involved in on the School Board and in each of her educational concerns can be seen not only the influence of the Democratic Federation, but the older radical tradition of her mother and step-father. Whether it is her concern for the use of educational endowments, free education, secular schooling, and equality of opportunity for girls, corporal punishment or her attempts to make the Board more financially responsible and openly democratic, the voice of Mill can often be heard in her reasoning. After her step-father's death she felt her purpose in life was to continue his work by being active in society. Her School Board concerns were one aspect of this. She wrote to Lady Amberley shortly after his death:

I feel as though a torch has been left in my hands and I want to keep it alight till I can hand it on to someone younger than myself.²¹

Mill believed, as a radical Liberal, that education should be secular and that educational endowments had been diverted from their original purpose, i.e. the education of the poor. These were all central concerns of Helen's nine years on the Board.²² Indeed, sometimes her speeches quoted him almost exactly. Mill had seen the new School Boards as 'bringing within reach of all classes and communities alike...the acquisition of an education of a greatly improved nature,' and had, as his step-daughter would strive to achieve, stressed that the working class should be represented on them.²³ Helen would reiterate, within the School Board chambers,

²¹ Helen Taylor to Lady Amberley, August 1872, Bertrand Russell Collection.

²² Mill's 'Inaugural address delivered to the University of St Andrews 1867' in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, Vol. xxi, John Robson (ed.), oll.libertyfund.org, pp. 215-259.

²³ J.S. Mill's speech to the Reform Association, published in *The Beehive*, 29 October 1870 and republished in Robson (ed.), *Collected Works vol. xxix Public and Parliamentary Speeches, part II*, p. 398.

Mill's views on the curriculum, that boys and girls should have a better education than mere reading, writing, arithmetic and technical knowledge and that:

No one was worthy to serve on the School Board who would not seek to secure attendance of every child at school, support free education and insist that the schools should not be made the means of instilling sectarian opinion.²⁴

The above became central to Helen's political agenda. She was no novice in educational matters when she entered the London School Board, having been Mill's collaborator in his political life. Furthermore, her background gave her access to advice and support from Mill's political colleagues after his death. For instance, when she first entered the Board she was advised by Edwin Chadwick on how to proceed with demands for challenging the use of educational endowments. She must have shared Mill's hopes and sense of excitement after the first elections in 1870 that here was a great opportunity for women:

The right of women to a voice in the management of *education* (sic) has been asserted by the triumphant return of two ladies as members of the London School Board & of several others in different parts of the country.²⁵

Three policies which clearly located Helen as a political player in an existing and evolving political tradition were her campaigns for secular education, for free state education and her work to reform the educational endowments. To these I now turn.

Secular Education

Helen's radicalism is clearly seen in her demand for secular education unfettered by Church control. From the first that was to bring her into open conflict with members of the Board, even before she had been elected. She would not compromise on this.

It was at the heart of her political beliefs. Secular state education, free from any

²⁴ Mill's speech to ratepayers in Greenwich and Deptford before the first Board Elections, *The Times*, 9 November 1870.

²⁵ J.S. Mill to Charles Loring Brace, 19 January 1871, file 2, no.388.

denominational bias, had been a long-time Radical goal and Helen fought for nine years against any watering down of the compromise reached in the 1870 Education Act, which had forbidden denominational teaching in London elementary schools whilst insisting on a daily reading of the Bible. The 1871 Conscience Clause had allowed parents to withdraw their children even from this. Helen was not anti-religion but she believed, from her liberal upbringing, that it was not the place of teachers to instil religion in children:

What I did urge strongly in speech after speech during the election contest, was that in desiring secular instruction only in state schools I was not opposed to religious teaching and least of all to religion itself. I said (what I am very strongly persuaded of) that religion should be taught by ministers of religion or by volunteer teachers, such as teachers of Sunday schools, and that the school master ought not to undertake the work of the clergyman, least of all when we have a church, the richest in the world, magnificently endowed to do its own work.²⁶

Her stance was that of the pre-Marx radicalism of the National Education League rather than the aggressive Marxist atheism of her fellow School Board and Democratic Federation colleague, Edward Aveling, who opposed any religion whatsoever in state education. It was the Unitarianism of her parents, a faith which insisted that the individual should be free to develop their own religious beliefs, in stark contrast to the dogmatic instruction which evangelical Anglicans desired every child to experience so that their souls might be saved.²⁷ As this work mentioned earlier, Helen and her brothers had been allowed to develop their own attitude to religion, her mother being so tolerant that she had regularly attended Catholic mass as a child and young woman. Helen had believed she would not win election to the

²⁶ Draft letter, Helen Taylor to Miss Hart, 1876, MTC, file 15, no. 82.

²⁷ Clare Midgley, 'Women, Religion and Reform' in Sue Morgan & Jacqueline de Vries (eds.), *Women, Gender and Religious Cultures in Britain, 1800-1940* (London, 2010), chapter 7, pp. 137-58, p.149. Midgley illustrates the importance of Unitarianism in the reform work of Octavia Hill and Mary Carpenter, whose 'scrupulous non-interference in the religion of those lives which they sought to improve' echoes Helen's attitude to religion in schools, p.150.

London School Board in 1876 because of her 'advocacy of gratuitous, compulsory and secular education.'²⁸ Southwark, her constituency, had a large Roman Catholic Irish population who, in later years, due to her support of Home Rule and the Irish Land War, fully supported Helen.

In 1876, however, her fellow Liberal, and election running partner, the Rev Sinclair, had feared that her avowal that her 'chief object in becoming a candidate was to promote secular views' would lead to them both being defeated in the poll; he had appealed for her to be more moderate on platforms with him.²⁹ Helen, however, could not compromise her beliefs. To believe one thing and hide it to get elected was outside the standards of morality which she believed were required in public life. She was elected despite her strident pronouncements on religion. Sinclair, too, was successful, though he bought charges of election misconduct against her and she had to defend herself at an official hearing. She had not, he claimed, referred to the fact that he was her official Liberal running partner at an election meeting.³⁰ Further, it was alleged that she had paid into the Southwark election committee £200, despite Sinclair being on supposedly equal terms as a running partner; that she had issued a handbill in support of her candidature only; that she had arranged a meeting at the Bridge House without official consent, and that she had not made clear the official policy on the religious question in schools to reporters.³¹ An inquiry found her innocent of the charges. After being cleared of misconduct, a supporter who had attended the inquiry wrote congratulating her on how she had dealt with the affair:

²⁸ Draft letter, Helen Taylor to Alice Westlake, 26 September 1876, MTC, file 16, no.181.

²⁹ John Sinclair to Helen Taylor, 17 October 1876, MTC, file 16, no. 147.

³⁰ *Bermondsey and Rotherhithe Advertiser*, 30 December 1876.

³¹ *Ibid*, 23 December 1876.

The charges ought never to have been made, and Mr Sinclair has damaged his good name irretrievably by refusing to manfully acknowledge his error, and apologise to you for his ungenerous conduct.³²

She faced, however, antagonism from the Liberal Party in each of the subsequent elections and Sinclair refused to stand as a candidate in the same borough in 1879, choosing to contest a seat elsewhere. She, in turn, as the official Liberals became openly hostile in their attempts to unseat her, stood in future elections as an independent Radical Democrat.

When the London School Board issued a circular on Religious Education in 1878, which called on teachers to teach the children ‘the truths upon which their future lives depended,’³³ Helen protested vehemently, supported by Benjamin Lucraft. She insisted the circular went against the religious compromise of 1871 and opened up the possibility of teachers imposing their own individual belief systems on the children. It would, she feared, encourage ‘dogmatic teaching.’ Such teaching was against every liberal principal she held. The following year, Helen objected to a London School Board report, *The Religious Examination of Pupil Teachers*, on the grounds that it threatened the religious liberty of the apprenticed teachers. She argued it would lead to head teachers putting pressure on pupil teachers to sit the Scripture examination because schools that did not put candidates forward would be marked down and lose grants. She was heavily defeated in her attempt to stop the report being issued to head teachers; but she had made a moral stand against what she thought was a serious violation of the liberal principle of secular education, which had been fiercely fought for, in the face of a united opposition from the

³² A. Moss to Helen Taylor, undated 1876, MTC, file 16, no. 113.

³³ *School Board Chronicle*, 8 June 1878.

Anglican church and Tory party, at the setting up of the School Board system.³⁴

Helen's belief in secular schooling shows her to be a disciple of Mill's philosophy of the freedom of the individual to choose, and not of the free-thinking atheism of feminists such as Annie Besant.³⁵

In 1883 a candidate for a teaching post at Jessop Road School, Brixton wrote to the press, complaining that he had been asked inappropriate questions during his interview in an attempt to discover his religious views. He had allegedly been asked by his interviewer:

Do you love to read the bible as you would a novel? Do you follow teaching for the love of God? Are you a churchman? Would you teach the boys right principles? What place of worship do you go to on a Sunday? ³⁶

Edward Aveling tabled, with Helen as his seconder - two Social Democratic Federation colleagues working together - a successful motion to have the matter examined by the Committee of Inquiry of the London School Board. The inquiry cleared the interviewer of misconduct but Helen and Aveling would not let the matter drop. They tried to get the Board to alter a letter to the *Pall Mall Gazette* on the subject and have the word 'completely' removed from before the word 'exonerated' in relation to the accused interviewer and have the words 'of denominational bias' inserted after the words 'the charges,' thus indicating that the

³⁴ *Ibid*, 19 July 1879.

³⁵ See Laura Schwartz, *Infidel Feminism* (Manchester, 2013). Schwarz identifies Florence Fenwick Miller as a free-thinking feminist. Freethinkers objected openly to the belief that religion was needed for morality (p.122). Helen supported a secular society but nowhere in the contemporary sources is she shown to have been openly hostile to Christianity, or to fit Schwartz's definition of secularists as those who regarded religion as 'superstition, as a form of hysteria, and as a relic of a more primitive age', p. 223. Helen's secularism supported rather the intellectual and social liberty of the individual. She obviously found a spirituality and beauty in the masses she attended which led to her comment to Kate Amberley that no one was ever safe from becoming a Catholic. Her rational mind, however, fought against the appeal that Catholicism undoubtedly had for her.

³⁶ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 8 January 1883, reprinted in *School Board Chronicle*, 20 January 1883.

Board had only partially cleared the interviewer.³⁷ Helen contested that the interviewer needed to be sanctioned ‘in order to show clearly that it is the intention of the Board to adhere to the religious principles which it had hitherto acted upon.’³⁸ Aveling and Helen were defeated, but the former protested in writing to the London School Board against their finding the manager of Jessop School not guilty of inappropriate questioning of a candidate. Aveling’s letter was published in the *School Board Chronicle*.³⁹

Helen and Aveling, though united in their support for secular education, were motivated by fundamental differences in their political mind-sets, a difference which will be examined later in the chapter on the Social Democratic Federation.

Aveling’s was a non-compromising atheism, supported by his adherence to Marx; Helen’s came from the radical liberal tradition of upholding personal liberty, following the writings of John Stuart Mill, from which she never wavered. Although she always referred to herself as a socialist, it was a pre-Marx socialism into which she inserted the Marxist demand for state ownership of the means of production. She remained a strong defender of individual rights and a belief in religious liberty, for tolerance was her inheritance. Therefore, although she opposed state religious education, she was a supporter of Sunday schools, which her colleague Aveling could never be.

Believing that the local community should have full use of Board schools, Helen campaigned for opening them on Sundays as Sunday schools and proposed a cut in the hire charge to 1s per head per annum to encourage such use, for ‘she had always

³⁷ *School Board Chronicle*, 17 February 1883.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 24 February 1883.

held that religious teaching should be carried out by those who believed in it.⁴⁰ She was successful in getting this proposal referred to the Works Committee despite some opposition from the Rev Murphy, who believed such use of Board schools as Sunday schools always resulted in damage to buildings and furniture.⁴¹ Despite her opposition, the Board voted at a later date to withdraw permission for such use.⁴² As well as Sunday use, Helen supported the opening of schools in her own constituency as reading rooms and libraries during the evenings.⁴³ Additionally, she was successful in getting playgrounds and schools opened for use by children in the holidays and proposed that drinking fountains should be installed.⁴⁴

Any claims that Helen did not put children at the heart of her policies is not borne out by a detailed examination of her work.⁴⁵ She could also work in collaboration with others and was not the individual maverick of historical account, as her alliances with Lucraft and Aveling in defence of secular education show. These alliances also demonstrate that while women collaborated on the London School Board to further the cause of their sex (a collaboration emphasised by the existing historiography), a study of the minute books and press reports show that women also formed political alliances with men within the Board.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 4 December 1880.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 24 February 1883.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 17 July 1880.

⁴⁴ *English Women's Review*, December 1879.

⁴⁵ Hollis, *Ladies Elect* (Oxford 1989), p. 105. Hollis accuses Helen of being 'parent centred' in her educational policies, claiming it was 'left to other women members to care for the crippled or abused child.'

Free state elementary education

Mill had moved towards supporting free elementary education towards the end of his life in 1870. He had written to Henry Fawcett in 1869 undecided on the issue and giving it as his reason for not joining the newly established National Education League, which was campaigning for free secular elementary schooling for all children, unfettered by denominational control:

I, like you, have a rather strong opinion in favour of making parents pay something for their children's *education* when they are able, though there are considerable difficulties in authenticating their inability. At all events I would have it left an open question; and because they refused to leave that and other secondary questions open, I did not join the *League*.⁴⁶

The issue of whether schooling should be free continued to divide Liberals, many feeling that it would remove parental responsibility, but Helen campaigned tirelessly for it throughout her nine years on the Board. It was a policy in Helen's election manifesto, a political stance, based on a belief of equal opportunity for all classes in society, regardless of sex or social status. The campaign gained ground during this time and free elementary education was finally achieved in 1891. Helen, in fact, came close to securing it for London's children in 1885, for which, hitherto, she has never received any credit. She and her supporters paved the way for future success. Patricia Hollis's dismissal of Helen as a marginalised member of the London School Board and her assessment that Annie Besant had more success in placing free education on the statute book, because she was adept at forming alliances, devalues the contribution Besant's predecessors made to the future success of the demand. The motion for free education in 1885 was only defeated on the casting vote of the Chairman, thus consigning Helen's campaign to historical obscurity.⁴⁷ Socialism, expounded by Helen on the Board, was a growing force and more influential by the

⁴⁶ J.S. Mill to Henry Fawcett, 24 October 1869, MTC, file 1, no. 159 (Mill's emphases).

⁴⁷ Patricia Hollis, *Ladies Elect*, p. 166.

time of Annie Besant's tenure. The political world had moved in favour of Helen's belief in free education. Helen regularly supported her Southwark constituents in their applications for relief from fees due to their inability to pay. In her successful support of two families in 1879 she insisted that:

It was a monstrous thing to expect this man [*Hughes*] to pay a shilling a week for the education of his children whom he was compelled by the Act to send to school.⁴⁸

She always opposed motions to raise the fees at various schools, though usually hers was a minority voice.⁴⁹ In her work on the Educational Endowments Committee, discussed below, she campaigned to have charitable endowments used to remit fees, because a third of school fees were being paid by parents who were too poor to afford them.⁵⁰

In 1882, as the national campaign for free education gained a growing number of adherents, Helen put forward a motion, seconded by Benjamin Lucraft, that 'the Board petition parliament to be allowed to open all its elementary schools free.'⁵¹ An amendment by the Rev Thomas was successful in having the matter postponed. During the debate, Helen had appealed for free schools on the grounds of economy, the London School Board being regularly pilloried in the press for its extravagance at the expense of the rate payer. She called to attention the work involved in collecting the fees and enforcing payment. Time was wasted sending home children to collect the fee and she claimed that teachers were paying out of their own pockets in order to keep the children in school and thereby earn the government grant. Free education would, she claimed, lead to better attendance and would save the tax

⁴⁸ *School Board Chronicle*, 17 May 1879.

⁴⁹ *School Board Chronicle*, 29 November 1879. Helen opposed the raising of fees at Blackheath Road School but the proposal was carried 17 to 7.

⁵⁰ *School Board Chronicle*, 6 September 1879.

⁵¹ *London School Board Minutes*, 20 April 1882.

payer money as truants, who were now sent to industrial schools, would be in Board schools, which would earn more in government grants for increased attendance.

Attendance at London elementary schools was then only running at seventy five per cent, which fell far short of children in schools in many other countries. Two reasons for this, she insisted, were fees and corporal punishment. London was in a 'disgraceful state of backwardness' in educational matters.

Opposition to her proposal came from the members supporting the voluntary church schools. The Rev Morse was reported to claim that:

Free education was a favourite theory with radical politicians and Socialist philosophers but that in his mind was simply Communism.⁵²

Education, he insisted, should remain 'a parental obligation'. Here is evidence that other members of the Board were attacking Helen's socialism rather than her personality. The historiography regards her as having had an eccentric individualistic personality but her opponents objected to her as a dangerous socialist who was attacking the structures of civilised British society. Free board schools, Morse feared, would destroy the voluntary church school system. The Rev Pearson claimed that free education would 'injure the dignity of the poor' as well as destroying the church schools.⁵³ There was at this time a section of the Board who always supported church schools to the detriment of advancing state education and this 'enemy within' was discussed in the press down the years. A few months before the 1879 School Board election the *School Board Chronicle* ran an editorial lamenting that

⁵² Report of debate in *School Board Chronicle*, 2 April 1881.

⁵³ *School Board Chronicle*, 22 April 1882.

...there has always been a party on the London School Board more or less opposed to the development of national education under the School Board system.⁵⁴

It was this vested interest of members who supported the voluntary system, which the progressive members of the Board, passionate about the state education which they were administering, had constantly to fight. Helen's 1882 motion was defeated but Helen was a tenacious proponent of state education. Her argument in supporting the successful motion of her fellow Southwark Board member Miss Richardson to have fee increases at Morrow Road Board School rescinded was that parents could not afford the new fee and would choose to send their children to the local church voluntary school instead.⁵⁵

As the 1880s progressed, free education was returned to again and again by the Board, usually, contemporary accounts show, at the instigation of Helen, a member from 1880 of the Democratic Federation, which had free state elementary schooling as a manifesto commitment. From 1880, until she argued with Hyndman in 1884, Helen was working to get the educational concerns of the Democratic Federation, including free secular education, adopted by the Board in the teeth of formidable political opposition. She constantly put forward motions in regard to school fees. They may have been lost, as when she tried to have fee remission granted for families living on less than 6d per head per day after rent, but she attempted to keep the plight of London's poor in the spotlight:

If any of the members had ever tried what it was like to live on 6d a day, she might then perhaps have awakened some sympathy in some of them.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 2 August 1879.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 5 March 1881.

⁵⁶ *School Board Chronicle*, 2 April 1881.

The National Education League, whom John Stuart Mill had addressed, had been formed in 1869 to campaign for free secular elementary education for all children and during 1881 the Free Education League was formed at a meeting in Westminster.⁵⁷ The demand for free education was gathering momentum and Helen was certainly at the fore in the London School Board. It debated the subject in July 1881, when Mr Hawkins, a fellow member for Southwark, attempted to have Orange Street School in Southwark turned into a free school, arguing that the London School Board had such powers through an Act of Parliament.⁵⁸ The previous month the Board had passed a motion instructing the School Management Committee to consider ‘the advisability of establishing a limited number of free schools in areas of deep poverty.’⁵⁹

Helen, it should be remembered, was representing one of the poorest of the London districts which stood to benefit from such a reform. During 1882 she lost attempts to block the recovery of school fee arrears by the Bye Laws Committee and to stop the Board discussing whether parents in arrears should be taken to the County Court.⁶⁰ At this time there were 733,000 children of school age in the capital and 525,999 were enrolled in the Board Schools, though absenteeism was running at one child in five at any time: a sign, it was concluded, of the ‘passive resistance’ of working-class Londoners to compulsory education.⁶¹

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 16 July 1881.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 9 July 1881.

⁵⁹ Chairman’s Report at opening of new session of the Board, *School Board Chronicle*, 29 October 1881.

⁶⁰ *London School Board Minutes*, 22 June 1882.

⁶¹ Chairman’s Report on the preceding year, *School Board Chronicle*, 14 October 1882.

During the 1882 election campaign Helen focused on her main goals, which she stated were free schools, no corporal punishment and the proper supervision of industrial schools. However, the *School Board Chronicle*, never a supporter of her campaigns, accused her, Elizabeth Surr and their fellow female supporters in the Board of ‘not looking at the real enemy – the opponents of a national education system’ in their continual opposition to the official policy of the Board.⁶² The *Chronicle* regarded Helen as a politically motivated obstructionist, making demands that could never be met. Whilst admiring her integrity and hard work, the newspaper felt she was wrongheaded in the causes she chose to support:

Miss Helen Taylor’s radicalism is of the type that does not much serve the true interests of the work, but the lady’s crotchets will probably be forgiven by the constituency by reason of her democracy, her ability and her devotion to what she conceives to be the interest of the public.⁶³

She was, as has been shown, supporting some manifesto pledges of her political party, and it would have been impossible for her not to continue campaigning for them despite certain defeat. It was politics rather than personality which led to conflict in the Board chamber.

In 1883 Helen accused the majority of the Board of being against the concept of free schools.⁶⁴ She continued to argue for them not only on economic grounds but also because the better attendance that would result from them would improve the capital’s standard of education as a whole. Some free schools had been created, under special measures and with Government approval by this time, in areas of extreme poverty. In her own constituency, she evidenced, attendance rates were

⁶² *Ibid*, editorial, 21 October 1882.

⁶³ *School Board Chronicle*, 4 November 1882.

⁶⁴ *School Board Chronicle*, 10 March 1883.

higher at these schools than in other schools in Southwark.⁶⁵ She moved that London children between the ages of three and five should be admitted free to all schools in London where attendance fell below the numbers accommodated for and that the Education Department should be petitioned for permission; unfortunately she lost the vote 19 to 10.⁶⁶ Public opinion was, however, turning in favour of free elementary education and throughout 1885, her last year in office, Helen continued to regularly press the subject, the votes getting ever closer. She opposed a successful motion which would suspend fee remission, which the Board granted in special cases, arguing that it would ‘cause a great deal of cruelty to those already in need.’⁶⁷ She attempted to win exemption from school fees for those parents who received ‘outdoor relief’ payments, arguing that their children should not be barred from school fee remission unless the relief payments had been specially made to include school expenses. This motion was declared ‘out of order’ and dropped because the Board’s Solicitor had already ruled that fees indeed could be expected to be paid from ‘outdoor relief.’⁶⁸ In June she attempted to get fees reduced in the Alma School, Southwark from 2d to 1d for each additional child in a family and only lost it on the casting vote of the chairman.⁶⁹ Undeterred, a few weeks later, and by then no doubt aware that she would not seek re-election and was therefore in her last months of being able to agitate on fees,⁷⁰ she attempted to win support to petition the Education Department for permission to charge no fees in schools classed as of ‘special difficulty’ in areas of abject poverty. Helen received support in this from George Mitchell, the radical agricultural trade unionist and fellow land campaigner,

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 12 May 1883.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 5 May 1883.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 14 February 1885.

⁶⁸ *London School Board Minutes*, 5 March 1885.

⁶⁹ *London School Board Minutes*, 18 June 1885.

⁷⁰ She did not seek re-election in 1885, concentrating instead on her campaign to become the first woman elected to Parliament. See chapter 5.

which shows how her alliances overlapped campaigns. Although they lost that motion 13 to 19, Helen and Mitchell continued to argue in the same meeting that the Board petition Parliament for permission to open all its schools free of charge and lost by only one vote, the casting vote of the Chairman.⁷¹ The educationalist and former London teacher Thomas Gautrey recalled this narrow defeat in his memoirs, describing Helen's 'impassioned speech' and declaring it to be a watershed in the fight for free elementary education. 'Free schools became from this time an election cry at both Board and Parliamentary Elections'.⁷² This campaign culminated in free education being achieved in 1891. Undeterred at narrowly failing to achieve free education in London elementary schools, Helen immediately gave notice that she would be putting forward a motion to petition Parliament on the same with the added demand that, instead of ratepayers footing the bill, the cost should be borne out of national taxation. This motion was later dropped and she was unable to follow it up as she left the Board in November 1885.⁷³

Helen's commitment to free education shows a deep understanding of the struggles of ordinary people. For her, it was a moral necessity to relieve the burden of poverty and enable the working class to access the education which would enable them to take their place in English democracy. This was something for which her mother and step-father had worked tirelessly.

The Reform of London's Educational Endowments

Further evidence of Helen's radical heritage and of nineteenth-century women's political agency is seen in her taking up the endowment question. This led to her

⁷¹ *London School Board Minutes*, 9 July 1885.

⁷² Gautrey, *Lux Mihi Laus School Board Memories*, p. 86.

⁷³ *London School Board Minutes*, 9 July 1885 and 5 November 1885.

becoming Chair of the Endowments Committee of the Board, a first for women in Local Government. This cause is a clear indication of how she regarded her political life as a continuation of her step-father's. A French obituary of Helen in 1907 made reference to how Mill's political work passed on to her on his death:

Il semblait, selon le mot d'un de ses amis, que le manteau prophétique du grand penseur qui venait de mourir, était tombé sur ses épaules.⁷⁴ (*It would seem, according to one of her friends that the prophetic coat of the great thinker who had just died had fallen on her shoulders.*)

The misuse of charitable endowments and the administrative chaos surrounding them had been exercising reforming minds throughout the century. That reform was urgently needed had long been agreed but the task was formidable. The concern was that money left for the amelioration of poverty had been diverted from its original purpose and was benefiting the better off. There was a long battle fought by those calling for reform which finally resulted in the setting up of the Charity Commission, with a remit to research all endowments and their use.⁷⁵ In many cases the value of a charitable trust had greatly increased since its inception but often it only paid out the original sum to its beneficiaries, leaving a tidy amount each year to share among the trustees. There were many abuses discovered by the Brougham Commission, which had been set up in 1816, including instances of schools with teachers and no pupils and churches with clergy and no congregation. By 1834, 26,771 charities had been investigated, 2,100 trusts had been reformed and 400 referred for prosecution. The Brougham Commission recommended in its reports between 1837 and 1840 that a charity commission should be set up to look into reform but this would take nearly twenty years to achieve. Brougham concluded that charitable endowments had been diverted from the poor they were set up to aid, and

⁷⁴ *Le Mistrel*, 6 February 1907, MTC, box 7.

⁷⁵ The background information in this paragraph is taken from J.J. Fishman, *Charitable Accountability and Reform in Nineteenth Century England. The Case of the Charity Commission*, (2005), <http://digitalcommons.pace.edu/lawfaculty/108>.

this became the mantra of Liberal reformers. In 1849 a Royal Commission of Inquiry was set up to look into mismanagement of endowments by the charities.

Little progress had been made on reforming the charitable endowments by the time of Helen's election to the School Board and there was much discontent in the press at the poor standard of the commissioners of the permanent Charity Commission, which had been set up by an Act of Parliament in 1853. It had been given extra powers to reform the parochial charities of the City of London and to return educational endowments in the capital to their original purpose. In 1873 it had taken over the remit of the Endowed Schools Commission. Hence the London School Board became heavily involved in the question of endowments, as it attempted to keep up with the demand for school places in the capital, which had a rapidly increasing school age population. If the Board could use the endowments available in the capital it would help it provide for London's children without any extra burden on the ratepayer.

A major problem, though, was that many schools, such as Harrow, which had been created for the education of the poor through charitable endowments, had become the preserve of the wealthy. Another obstacle for reformers like Helen, concerned that the poor should have misappropriated endowments returned for their benefit, was that the Taunton Commission of 1868 had recommended that educational endowments should be used to expand the provision of schools for the burgeoning middle classes, with fees to be charged at such schools for non-scholarship places. To Helen, this would clearly have been, morally and politically, totally unacceptable. The middle classes had appropriated money intended for the

education of the poor. There was, indeed, a great deal of money at stake. The Endowed Schools Act of 1869 had allowed the Commissioners to apply any redundant endowments, whose original intention had been lost or was no longer viable, for educational purposes. Such was the state of affairs when Helen came on to the School Board in 1876 with the School Board and the Charity Commission working closely together as the Board looked for endowments to increase school provision.

Helen had an excellent background knowledge of the complete bureaucratic mess which charitable endowments were in from her work with her step-father. One of Mill's great educational concerns had been that redundant endowments should be used for educational purposes:

There are numerous charitable funds which are now, under the terms of antiquated trusts, distributed in mere doles, to persons supposed to be necessitous, but who have not always even that claim, such as it is. It would be a far more efficacious mode of alleviating the evil of indigence, to employ these funds in making war on its principal cause, the want of education.⁷⁶

Mill and Helen were aware that the endowments question was also a question of women's rights, in that that money had been stolen from girls. Mill had written to Florence May in 1866 on the problem:

On the other side we see how very little extensive endowments will do if those for whose benefit they have been made have not the power of insuring their application; since there is scarcely one if one of all the educational endowments in the country, most of which were originally made for poor boys and girls, which have not been long ago appropriated to the boys of those classes which possess political influence.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Written in 1866. J. S. Mill, Report of Commissioners on Education in Schools in England 1867-8, in Robson (ed.), *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. xxi.

⁷⁷ J.S. Mill to Florence May, dated 1868, reprinted in Robson & Robson, *Sexual Equality*, p. 118. (J.S. Mill and Helen had received correspondence from this young woman, seeking their advice.)

Many in the suffrage movement were concerned with the education of middle-class girls; Helen was unusual in concerning herself with the right of working-class girls to receive a good education. In 1872 the Girls' Public Day School Company (which later became the Girls' Day School Trust) was established by Maria Grey of the National Union for the Improvement of the Education of Women of all Classes, which although non-denominational was Christian in ethos. Fees were charged for non-scholarship holders and money raised from shareholders who were paid dividends.⁷⁸ The middle classes were keen to use the endowments for their own sons and daughters. The year 1878 saw the admission of women to degrees at the University of London, and Newnham College, Cambridge had been founded for the education of women in 1871. The *English Women's Review* lauded these advances⁷⁹ and Helen herself, of course, was a keen supporter of this opening up of education to middle-class girls. She had paid for Agnes McLaren, the daughter of the suffragist Priscilla McLaren and Duncan McLaren MP, to attend medical school in Montpellier.⁸⁰ She had also offered to pay for her niece, Nelly, to attend Newnham College as she believed 'increasingly there are opportunities to become Head of the increasing number of girls' schools' but her brother declined to accept.⁸¹ During Helen's first School Board election campaign, in 1876, the educationalist and political colleague of Mill, Edwin Chadwick, had written to her advising her to make endowments a central campaigning issue. She had the upbringing and contacts which enabled her to understand and successfully involve herself in the political issues of the day. The briefing even gave her the language she should use:

⁷⁸ <http://www.oxforddnb.com/templates/theme.jsp?articleid=94164&back=&backToResults=>

⁷⁹ *English Women's Review*, August 1878.

⁸⁰ See correspondence between Helen and Agnes, MTC, file 14, nos. 17-42.

⁸¹ Algernon Taylor to Helen Taylor, 20 September 1878, MTC, file 24, no. 96 and Helen Taylor (draft) 22 September 1878, MTC, file 24, no. 98.

Allow me to suggest that it would be an important topic to dwell upon, if you have not taken it already, that you would vote for making the ‘confiscators’ disgorge the funds left for the education of the poor, amounting to a quarter of a million according to the report of the School Board but which had been applied by the city companies to other purposes . . . ‘Confiscators’, ‘Malfaisants’ would be the right terms to apply.⁸²

On 8 November 1876 the London School Board created the Educational Endowments Committee to draw up a register of endowments in London which might be of service in providing schooling under the Board system.⁸³ Elizabeth Surr had been appointed to it on her election in 1876 and Helen speedily involved herself with the subject, following Chadwick’s advice.⁸⁴ Her speech at her post-election celebration dinner in January 1877 concentrated on the importance of educating girls as well as boys to their true potential and called for endowments to be returned to their original purpose:

It is not unwomanly to say that the men, aye, and the women of old days left money for education; let us apply it to its true uses. When all these things are done we shall see a change in the whole institutions of the country, and a change which I for one will welcome.⁸⁵

In Helen’s first year of office she supported a motion to use endowments to set up Board secondary schools, which would choose candidates by means of a competitive examination. For Helen this provided a means for the working class to advance in society to the full extent of their abilities rather than be educated for their station in life. The present situation was not acceptable, Helen believed, and only the setting up of state higher education schools would solve the problem, for ‘the Board begged schools for scholarships and only thirty nine scholarships had been

⁸² Edwin Chadwick to Helen Taylor, 16 November 1876, MTC, file 15, no. 28.

⁸³ Information taken from the *Report of the Educational Endowment Committee on City Parochial Charities*, 19 July 1879.

⁸⁴ *London School Board Minutes*, 13 December 1876.

⁸⁵ Helen Taylor’s Banquet Speech, 20 January 1877, reprinted in Robson & Robson, *Sexual Equality*, p. 152.

received.’⁸⁶ After the election of 1879 Helen was appointed onto the Educational Endowments Committee.⁸⁷ In 1882 she moved successfully that a letter be sent to the Charity Commission, calling on them not to apply ‘to any other purpose funds left for free education of poor children of Bethnal Green but to extend that free education in proportion to the increase of funds.’⁸⁸ She lost an attempt to get the Board to send a letter to the Charity Commission, urging it not to use funds for the education of the poor of Tower Hamlets for the borough's Bancroft Hospital.⁸⁹ In December 1882, after a third election success, Helen was reappointed to the Educational Endowments Committee.⁹⁰

The following April the Committee gave one of its regular reports to the Board, which was considering the educational endowment of a John Carpenter, from which the City of London paid for the education of four boys, sons of freemen of the city. The Educational Endowments Committee had established that no will was in existence to support these payments. The Corporation of the City of London now wanted to establish a school to ‘instruct boys in the higher branches of literature’ and, to help fund this, wished to use £900 a year from that particular endowment. The Educational Endowments Committee recommended that the Board should consider this request. The report, however, carried a dissenting statement by committee members Helen, Mr Roston Bourke, Mr Charles White and the radical agricultural trade unionist George Mitchell, to the effect that it was not known how

⁸⁶ *School Board Chronicle*, 6 October 1877.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 13 December 1879.

⁸⁸ *London School Board Minutes*, 4 May 1882.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 4 May 1882.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 1 December 1882.

much the Corporation of the City of London had benefited from this legacy from the fifteenth century to the present day and

...that we are of the opinion it is desirable some portion of those funds be applied to the education of the poor and that we recommend requesting the Corporation of the City of London to afford us information as to the property and estates left in trust or otherwise by John Carpenter, any record as to the purposes for which the property was left, the amounts received up to the year 1834 and the value at the present time of the property known as the Carpenter's Trust.⁹¹

In submitting this statement Helen and her colleagues were doing the job of the overwhelmed Charity Commission, which was trying to gather all this information from every charity. The Educational Endowments Committee was drawing up its own register of all charities in the capital in order to identify those from which it could benefit in the provision of compulsory education to Londoners. It wrote regularly to identified charities, asking them to give the Board full details of their legacies and the use to which they were put, though sometimes this information was hard to obtain and letters remained unanswered. The Educational Endowments Committee was, however, successful in compiling a great deal of information on charitable trusts in London which was useful to the Board.⁹² Although a firm supporter of the Board's intention to set up its own higher education schools, in 1882 Helen opposed the form that it was proposed they should take, since she felt that the scheme, which would have used money obtained from educational endowments would benefit only the middle classes. She urged them to consider the creation of higher education evening schools, which the poor could attend after work and which would be

...a scheme for the education of the people but this [*the intended plan*] was a scheme for using the money and the energy of the board for the education of the

⁹¹ *Ibid.* 2 April 1883

⁹² The Educational Endowments Committee of the London School Board Reports of 1876, 1879 and 1883 list charities and records those they had contacted and their replies.

well-to-do.’ She could not support endowments being ‘perverted from the use of the poor to that of the rich.’⁹³

Helen campaigned vigorously for the working classes to be included in a scheme for secondary education. She wanted existing elementary schools to be used for night schools, to avoid the cost of new buildings, and the schools to be mixed though under the control of women teachers, since women would encourage the girls in the school, which, she claimed, was the case in the United States. Furthermore, books and materials in these schools should be free so as not to deter the poor.⁹⁴

In opposing the closure of the endowed, non-fee-paying Bacon’s Free School, Bermondsey, by the Charity Commissioners, Helen accused the Commissioners of diverting money left for the poor for the use of more able, privileged children elsewhere in the capital, insisting that ‘the money was left for poor children and not necessarily for clever children.’ The *School Board Chronicle*, never a supporter of Helen, accused her of ‘bad logic’ over this stance and in particular over her insistence that, even after free education was achieved, the endowments should be used for the education of the poor until ‘they ceased to pay rates and taxes.’ Rather, the newspaper argued, the endowments should not be used for elementary education but should facilitate the setting up of higher education board schools for academically able children.⁹⁵ At a public meeting in Bermondsey against the closure of Bacon School Helen was greeted by the audience with cheers as she emphasised on the importance of defending the endowed schools, which accommodated the

⁹³ *School Board Chronicle*, 25 February 1882.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 18 March 1882.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 30 June 1883.

poor and which ‘had been left to them by their ancestors.’⁹⁶ Helen’s stance on this was political and supported by her political colleagues in the Democratic Federation. The party’s newspaper *Justice* lauded her work on the subject and the success she had had in obtaining endowment money for food and clothing for the poor in Board Schools, which it was expected would be followed by other school boards throughout the country.⁹⁷

In 1883 Helen became the first woman to be appointed by the London School Board as chair of a permanent standing committee, the Educational Endowments Committee.⁹⁸ Helen’s work as Chair of the Educational Endowments Committee was of great value and this was acknowledged in the *School Board Chronicle*, which criticised her political stance during her nine years on the Board. An editorial noted that the committee ‘under her presidency has collected and presented to the Board a large amount of valuable information.’⁹⁹ The 1884 report to the Board, under her leadership, urged the Board to obtain control of the endowments to feed and clothe the poor.¹⁰⁰ The Board had asked the Endowments Committee to report back on how endowments intended for the education of the poor could be used for that purpose. The report concluded that the Charity Commission should make the government aware of those London charities for food and clothing and apprenticing, the administration of which could be transferred to the London School Board.¹⁰¹ Her step-father would have wholeheartedly approved of her work on this and the advancement in opportunity for women in public life that would follow her chairing

⁹⁶ *South London Press*, 7 July 1883.

⁹⁷ *Justice*, 12 April 1884.

⁹⁸ *School Board Minutes*, 28 June 1883.

⁹⁹ *School Board Chronicle*, 10 October 1885.

¹⁰⁰ *Report of the Endowment Committee to the London School Board*, 11 February 1884.

¹⁰¹ *School Board Chronicle*, 27 October 1884.

of the Committee. It had opened a door of opportunity through which other women would follow in local government.

The Gendering of Education: challenges to separate spheres in the curriculum, the teaching profession and the School Board meetings

Separate spheres, 'one of the fundamental organising characteristics of middle class society in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century England,'¹⁰² was undermined by the election of women onto the new school boards. Women were now taking their place as elected members of a public body. It has been demonstrated how difficult it was for women to become involved in early nineteenth-century radical reforming societies, philanthropy being the only acceptable public activity for women.¹⁰³

The 1869 Municipal Franchise Act gave women direct political agency. Hitherto, they had taken an interest in politics as supporters of men. Now 'mutinous women were crowding and buckling the doors of male privilege.'¹⁰⁴ The separate spheres ideology was negotiated by the elected women, in particular Helen, Florence Fenwick Miller, who had trained as a doctor, and Elizabeth Surr, supported by some radical male members. Together they resisted the gendering of education in the school curriculum and the patriarchy of the London School Board itself, where men dominated the debates.

How were some women able to have such influence in a society which believed women should be confined to the private world of the home and how much

¹⁰² Catherine Hall, *White, Male and Middle Class* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 106.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, p. 120.

¹⁰⁴ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather* (London, 1995), p. 282.

influence did they manage to wield on policy? The answer is: quite a considerable amount, though not without facing a barrage of opposition. These women were able to achieve agency in public life because they shared certain privileged social characteristics. Whilst they were discriminated against in society by their sex they were privileged through their ethnicity and class. They had money, education and connections.

Patricia Hollis, in her examination of women in local government, portrays Helen as a difficult personality who used her position in society to her own advantage. For instance, she claims that Helen ‘without scruples used Mill’s name to build support for herself’ in her election campaign of 1876.¹⁰⁵ Helen was proud of her step-father’s reputation as the most respected philosopher of that era and it would be inevitable that she would put herself forward as his step-daughter, who had worked closely with him as an equal partner in his intellectual output for over ten years. Mill had, as previously noted, acknowledged this debt in his *Autobiography*. All the women London School Board members of the time were well connected and indeed there was only one current working-class member, the former Chartist and trade unionist, Benjamin Lucraft.

Jane Martin’s study of the women members of the London School Board, throughout its thirty-three years history, uses Stacey and Price’s sociological model for success in politics to show that nearly all of them had similar privileged backgrounds, which enabled their involvement. Namely, they came from politically active families, had a middle- or upper-class background, had financial resources of

¹⁰⁵ Hollis, *Ladies Elect: Women in English Local Government*, p. 92.

their own or were supported by their families and they had few family commitments.¹⁰⁶ Despite being marginalised because of their sex, they had opportunities for influence denied to working-class and middle-class women with less education and domestic commitments.¹⁰⁷ These elected ladies, if married like Florence and Elizabeth, had the support of their husbands for their public work and an ability to organise child care, for serving on the School Board was time-consuming. They were racially and socially privileged in that their English protestant identity intersected with their family status to enable them to enter the political arena despite a social ideology which held that the world of politics was for men only.¹⁰⁸

Helen was aware of the unfairness of being part of this elite and campaigned for more working-class involvement in education. She tried to open up Board membership to the working-class by putting forward a motion that the Board should petition Parliament for the power to pay members an annual amount not exceeding £200 each, which would have enabled the working class to take seats. She spoke passionately on the subject in the debate, declaring:

It was impossible that those most interested in the Board's work – the working-classes – should be represented upon it unless they were paid....This Board should be a popular Board and should really represent the working-classes and the parents of the children should have a chance of coming upon it.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Martin, *Women and the Politics of Schooling in Victorian and Edwardian England*, p. 53.

¹⁰⁷ See Stephanie A. Shield, 'Gender: An Intersectionality Perspective,' *Sex Roles*, (2008), pp. 201-11.

¹⁰⁸ Intersectionality theorists have begun to explore how the theory can be extended to all women, not just black women, who experience discrimination in intersecting ways across gender, race and class. See J. Nash, 'Rethinking Intersectionality,' *Feminist Review* (2008), 89, pp. 1-15. Nash reminds us that although a woman might be a victim of patriarchy, she may be privileged through some other aspects of her social identity.

¹⁰⁹ *School Board Chronicle*, 7 March 1885.

She lost this motion with only six votes for and thirty-two against¹¹⁰ but followed it up with a motion that meetings should be put forward to 7pm instead of 3pm to allow working parents to attend them and so become involved in the education of their children. This she lost but by the narrow margin of two.¹¹¹ She firmly believed that the Board needed to include talented working-class members and railed in a Board meeting against the aristocratic radicals ‘who thought or seemed to think that the better off people were better in the moral tone.’¹¹²

Helen may have traded on her family reputation to get elected but she was no supporter of the social status quo that had allowed her to do so. Her money, lack of family commitments and political connections gave her the ability and social network to take her place in public life and she used her privileges to attempt to change society so that lower-class women and the working class in general could be empowered. These women on the London School Board supported each other at election meetings and Helen offered Florence the money to fight an election. Florence, though, turned down the offer because she felt this would make her lose her political independence. Helen then arranged for Florence to meet with the educationalist William Ellis, with the result that he funded Fenwick Miller’s election campaign.¹¹³ Thus it is undeniable that their privileged position in society was the reason they could wield influence in local government, which their less socially privileged sisters could never do.

¹¹⁰ *London School Board Minutes*, 5 March 1885.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 5 March 1885.

¹¹² *School Board Chronicle*, 11 July 1885.

¹¹³ See Florence Fenwick Miller, *An Uncommon Girlhood*, unpublished memoir, Welcome Institute.

Each of the policies Helen supported within the London School Board for her three terms of office had equality between men and women at their heart. She strove for equality of opportunity for boys and girls, men and women teachers and for the working class to have no limits set on their advancement in society. A perusal of the *English Women's Journal* shows how feminists were demanding more opportunities for girls to be educated for careers at this time. Women were demanding that their life choices should include paid work and this was necessary because, with a surplus of women, not all women married. The women of the School Board brought the demands of the women's movement into the administration of the education of London's children. Girls should have opportunities, which were being denied them, to have their minds developed at the same rate as boys.

An examination of each of Helen Taylor's campaigns is evidence of the political agency which women obtained after the municipal franchise had been extended to them in 1869, despite a middle-class ideology which extolled women as home makers, mothers and wives. Separate spheres ideology was not all-encompassing and was challenged by a privileged number of women who used their status to confront the sexism they found in the debating chamber and in legislation. Men and women disregarded the ideology of separate spheres and worked together to form political alliances within the debating chamber in an attempt to bring about changes in society to give agency to the working class and attack privilege.

The school curriculum was gendered. Boys and girls were being prepared for different lives, boys for the world of work and girls for the private domestic realm. Feminists on the Board were determined to change this. Helen's work to make

changes to the school curriculum in order to give girls equal status as pupils shows how feminism was at the core of her work. For female Board members their election gave them an opportunity to work for the advancement of their sex in society. Many, though not all, passionately believed that the school system, in its bias towards the educational success of boys, was wrong and had to change. In opposing the highly gendered nature of the school curriculum, feminists such as Helen and Florence were aided by a number of male supporters but not by more traditional suffragists such as Miss Davenport Hill.

Helen had seen in the relationship of her mother with John Stuart Mill how men and women could live equally and how women could achieve intellectually as much as men. She believed such equality could be obtained by the national school board system being forced to stop treating girls as second-class citizens, as if they were incapable of the intellectual endeavours of their male peers. Not only were girls physically separated from boys by the architecture of the new Board schools with their separate entrances, play grounds and departments for boys and girls but girls also had a separate curriculum from boys.¹¹⁴

A Needlework Sub Committee report of 1873, during which year the London School Board appointed an examiner for needlework, found that girls were spending between five and seven hours a week on sewing, during which time the boys would be engaged in extra arithmetic. In 1870 the theory of Domestic Economy had been added to the curriculum code for girls and became compulsory in 1878. In 1882 cookery in schools became eligible for a government grant and the drive to educate

¹¹⁴ I am indebted to A.M. Turnbull, 'Learning her womanly work. The Elementary School Curriculum 1870 –1914' in F. Hunt (ed.), *Lessons For Life, The Schooling of Girls and Women 1850-1950* (Oxford, 1987), for the information in this paragraph.

girls for a domestic future continued throughout the century. Laundry work was added to the curriculum in 1889 and housewifery in 1897. Helen, throughout her nine years on the Board, along with most other women members, opposed this division between the sexes in education at every available opportunity, using her feminism to influence educational policy.

Helen always voted against attempts to reduce girls' education to a mere preparation for domestic life. From her election in 1876 she vigorously opposed the demands of the needlework curriculum on girls along with her fellow women Board members, in particular Florence Fenwick Miller who, at twenty-two, was the youngest elected member. They failed in an attempt to have the Board oppose the new education code of 1877 before it became law. Florence dismissed the proposed new needlework requirements; if it

...had not been drawn up by a fanatic it had certainly been drawn up by a specialist – probably by a lady who was so devoted to needlework that she could see no good in anything else.¹¹⁵

The women members challenged this increasingly domestic curriculum for girls every time it came up for debate and vote. In so doing, they were challenging the existing received ideas of Victorian society and of many of their fellow Board members who regarded the education of girls as preparing them for a life running a home and saw no value in treating them to the same opportunities as boys, who, they assumed, had to be educated to support a family. A school text book from 1878 shows the weight of expectation for girls to be mere mothers and wives and how women like Helen and Florence were swimming against the tide in their demands

¹¹⁵ *School Board Chronicle*, 28 March 1877.

for equality of opportunity for girls at school. The textbook includes the following catechism:

- Q. What is domestic economy?
A. The wise management of a household.
Q. For what purpose did God create women?
A. That she might be a help mate for man.
Q. Can a woman be a help mate without having a knowledge of domestic economy?
A. No, every woman ought to know how to make a home comfortable.¹¹⁶

A London teacher, T.E. Gautry, recalled a heated exchange during a Board meeting between Helen and the Reverend John Rogers which shows the patriarchal opposition she faced to protect and further the position of girls in education. She challenged him: ‘So Mr Rogers you would not allow us poor women any sphere?’ He retorted ‘Oh yes I would, get a house full of children then stay at home and mind them.’¹¹⁷

It was not just among male Board members that support for domestic subjects for girls was found. Rosamund Davenport Hill, always an ally of the official ring within the Board, supported the demands of the increasing domestic curriculum on girls and became Chair of the Cookery and the Domestic Subjects Committee. Her belief in the central importance for domestic subjects for girls led to Henrietta Muller denouncing her in the *Women's Penny Post* as ‘not a friend to women.’¹¹⁸ Gender solidarity should, therefore, not be overplayed, nor the fact ignored that some men also worked to subvert gendered expectations in education.

¹¹⁶ Quoted in D. Attar, *Wasting Girls' Time: The History and Politics of Home Economics*, (London, 1990), p. 25.

¹¹⁷ Gautrey, *Lux Mihi Laus. School Board Memories*, p. 178.

¹¹⁸ Jane Martin, ‘Fighting down the idea that the only place for women was in the home. Gender and Policy in Elementary Education,’ *History of Education*, vol 24, no 4, (1995), pp. 277-292, p. 288. She is quoting Henrietta in *The Woman's Penny Post*, 24 November 1888.

In 1880 Helen voiced her opposition to a new education code, which increased the time spent on domestic subjects by girls, by protesting ‘against the increasing stringency of requirements in Needlework’ for girls and infants.¹¹⁹ Helen regarded it as a waste of educational time:

If girls were going to do needlework, though there was far too much of it in her opinion, then it should be of help to their mothers and they should be allowed to sew items from home.¹²⁰

Florence and Helen put forward a number of motions to the Board to reduce the needlework requirement and they were finally successful in achieving a reduction in 1884.¹²¹ They failed, however, to stop the increasing encroachment of domestic subjects for girls within the school curriculum. When a motion was presented in 1885 to make drawing an optional subject for girls, because of over-pressure due to the requirements of needlework and cookery, Helen was strong in her protests in that it departed

...from the principle of equal intellectual training for girls and boys . . . Let the girls have the same fair chance to have their minds and intellects educated.¹²²

During her last year of office Helen made an unsuccessful attempt to have the number of cookery lessons for girls reduced from twenty to sixteen, the Board voting more than two to one to retain the status quo.¹²³ Helen never patronised the working class, unlike many of her colleagues, who saw state education as merely a preparation for a pre-ordained role in society for the lower orders. The Reverend Daniels declared cookery to be the most important subject for girls to be taught. The ex-Chartist Benjamin Lucraft, however, was led to protest against Alice Westlake’s claim, during the same debate, that the working class were completely ignorant on

¹¹⁹ *London School Board Minutes*, 23 June 1880.

¹²⁰ *School Board Chronicle*, 17 July 1880.

¹²¹ *Ibid*, 26 January 1884.

¹²² *Ibid*, 1 August 1885.

¹²³ *School Board Minutes*, 12 March 1885.

how to cook and eat cheaply.¹²⁴ For some on the Board their work was middle-class philanthropy; for more radical members like Lucraft and Helen it was politically motivated campaigning for the advancement of the working class through educational opportunity. Helen wished education to be the means of enabling the formation of a meritocracy where everyone, men and women, could achieve according to their mental capacity. She spoke during her thrice-yearly constituency meetings on the importance of education for her working-class constituents. ‘Then the improved education of the people would allow them to be the masters of their own position.’¹²⁵ Her intransigence on educational matters was not through bloody-mindedness but from a visionary belief in what could and should be achieved. She faced the laughter and ridicule of the Board when, during a debate on setting up higher education schools, she echoed her step-father’s belief that the working class should have access to a classical education. She wished, she declared,

...to see the time when the masterpieces of the literary world should be open to the enjoyment of the working-classes and when the mother of a working family might be able to relate to her children as they sat at her feet and she was occupied with her sewing tales from the tragedies of Greece and arguments from Plato.¹²⁶

Helen understood that girls were hampered in their education by their home life, much more than boys were. They often had to help to look after younger siblings while their mothers worked, and so she attempted to have babies’ rooms included in schools to enable girls to attend regularly.¹²⁷

Helen further believed that boys and girls should be taught together in mixed schools under the control of female head teachers. Showing her knowledge of

¹²⁴ *School Board Chronicle*, 1 June 1878.

¹²⁵ *Southwark Recorder and Advertiser*, 2 May 1885, MTC, box 6.

¹²⁶ *School Board Chronicle*, 11 November 1882.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 14 April 1877.

society outside Britain, she pointed to the German school model of mixed schools headed by a headmaster as detrimental to the education of the girls, ‘who showed no enthusiasm for education after they left school.’¹²⁸ She was correct in her assessment that the gendered curriculum was damaging the education of girls. A report on School Board scholarships to higher schools showed that the performance of girls in the scholarship examination for post-elementary education, and therefore the number of places awarded, fell far below that of the boys.¹²⁹ Her local paper, the *Bermondsey and Rotherhithe Advertiser*, recorded the concerns which she expressed at one of her constituency meetings. She brought to the attention of those present that the girls were behind the boys in educational achievement in every school in London and blamed it on the needlework they were forced to do while the boys did extra arithmetic.¹³⁰

Helen’s battle was for equality of opportunity, a challenge to the separate spheres ideology. She wanted a level playing field, not favoured treatment for one sex over the other. Prizes were awarded for good attendance and girls were at a disadvantage because they were often kept at home to help their mothers. When a proposal was put forward to award girls prizes for achieving only one full attendance card Helen objected on the grounds that it was unfair to those girls who had achieved the prize under the existing rules for boys and girls. Treating girls under different rules to boys was not equality in Helen’s eyes. Legislation was required to enable them to experience education in the same way as boys.

¹²⁸ *School Board Chronicle*, 4 August 1883.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Bermondsey and Rotherhithe Advertiser*, 20 November 1880, MTC, box 6.

Helen used her election to the London School Board to further the cause of women in the teaching profession. She passed up no opportunity for nearly a decade to improve employment rights for women teachers and give them equality with male teachers. She has been accused in the historiography of being unpopular with teachers because she supported having salaries based on average attendances of children in the previous school year, rather than school size, and for her attempts to increase class sizes in the name of economy and savings to the rate payer.¹³¹ When she seconded the motion to have salaries based on average attendance, Helen declared that she was doing so in support of a fairer system. She hated unfairness and the present system seemed grossly unfair to her:

Already there was too much of a system of the head teacher leaving all the work to the assistants and merely walking up and down the schools.¹³²

This accusation, that she did not support the teachers, is incorrect. She was consistent in her demands for men and women to be treated equally in society. She opposed gender discrimination both in schools and within the debating chamber and contested any legislation aimed at reducing what hard-fought-for rights women had won to have a career and the means to an independent and fulfilled professional life. She sought equality of pay and conditions for women teachers and was a staunch defender of their employment rights nearly a hundred years before the successful passing of the Equal Pay Act in 1970, and before Clementina Black,¹³³ Secretary of the Women's Trade Union League, successfully secured an equal pay resolution at the Trades Union Congress in 1888.¹³⁴ As early as 1878 Helen was defending the

¹³¹ Hollis, *Ladies Elect*, p. 104.

¹³² *School Board Chronicle*, 3 July 1880.

¹³³ <http://www.unionhistory.info/> A collaboration between the TUC and London Metropolitan University celebrated Clementina's work to secure equal pay but nowhere in the resources is Helen's work for equal pay mentioned; her contribution goes unrecorded.

¹³⁴ *The Women's Time Line*, <http://www.mmu.ac.uk/humanresources/equalities/doc/gender-equality-timeline.pdf>

right of women teachers to have the same terms of employment as their male colleagues. Helen, Elizabeth Surr and Florence Fenwick Miller successfully opposed a recommendation by an internal committee of the London School Board not to appoint any woman with young children to the post of headmistress. Elizabeth feared this was the ‘thin edge of the wedge’ put forward by men working for the ‘ultimate exclusion of all female teachers from Board Schools’ and Helen maintained that women had a better absence record than men with or without children.¹³⁵ Helen regularly attempted to have men and women teachers paid at the same rate, putting forward a heavily defeated motion in 1879 during a debate on the new salary scales, which was seconded by Florence and supported by two men, Rev Coxhead and Mr Firth.¹³⁶ Here was an example of her putting principle before success, as Elizabeth reminded Helen’s constituents during one of the regular meetings she held for them in Southwark:

(Helen)...did not work for success, she was generally found upon the losing side, fighting like a brave soldier in the cause which she conceived to be true and just.¹³⁷

The weight of opposition to gender equality in the work place, in a patriarchal society in which women were regarded as home makers, was overwhelming and Board member Mr Picton expressed the contemporary gendered view when he declared in debate that:

The female teachers as a whole were not so good teachers as the males and besides this; the Board ought not to pay more than the market value. There were always far more female candidates for a post under the Board than there were male. Their services could be obtained at a cheaper rate than the services of men and it was the same in many other branches of industry.¹³⁸

¹³⁵ *School Board Chronicle*, 2 Feb 1878.

¹³⁶ *School Board Minutes*, 30 April 1879.

¹³⁷ *Bermondsey and Rotherhithe Advertiser*, 11 March 1882.

¹³⁸ *School Board Chronicle*, 3 May 1879.

For Helen it was a case of simple morality, equal pay for equal work. ‘She objected to any female teachers receiving less than the male teachers did.’¹³⁹ Helen was supported in her stance by fellow English suffragists in the *English Women’s Review*, which cited America as a country with higher teaching standards due to theirs being an overwhelmingly female profession and criticised male members of the London School Board who believed, like the Rev Daniel, that women were inferior teachers to men.¹⁴⁰

In 1883 Helen succeeded in having the joint assessment of married teachers’ income referred to the Board’s Solicitor on the grounds of possible unlawfulness under the Married Women’s Property Act in 1882.¹⁴¹ Later that year she unsuccessfully attempted to amend a motion on uncertified teachers’ salary scales which would have given women pay parity, attracting only ten supporters but showing that there were male Board members who felt as she did on the matter and that not all men upheld the inferior position of women in Victorian society.¹⁴² Contrary to the impression conveyed by the historiography that women banded together on the Board to support the women’s cause, not all women members voted with Helen. It is

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *English Woman’s Review*, May 1879. Though the *Review* closely followed the work of the School Boards it was mainly in terms of membership of them being an advancement of women’s rights and not through a concern with the education of the poor. The interest of the *Review* revolved mainly round the burgeoning schools for middle-class girls and the opening up of university education to women. It did not show any interest in the education of the working class except insofar as it made them good servants for its middle-class readership. Again, this concern with the quality of education for the poor is an example of Helen’s different political outlook and feminism from those of many in the suffrage movement.

¹⁴¹ *School Board Minutes*, 2 July 1883.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 13 December 1883.

also important to record that radical men supported attempts at gender equality, a fact which has hitherto been largely ignored.¹⁴³

Helen was supported by Miss Hastings but Miss Davenport Hill, ‘a hard nut to crack,’¹⁴⁴ Miss Richardson and Mrs Westlake all voted with the majority against equal pay and continued to do so on future salary motions. The new salary scales were to prove a long drawn-out affair, taking up much of the Board’s time until their resolution late in 1883 but Helen was tenacious, never passing up an opportunity to get equal pay on the agenda. She put forward a motion:

To affirm the desirableness of making salaries of men and women Assistant Teachers same in same grades, to accomplish this by taking the mean between salaries.¹⁴⁵

Again Miss Davenport Hill, Miss Richardson and Mrs Westlake put loyalty to their parties above gender solidarity and voted with the majority against pay parity, leaving Helen, Florence and Miss Hastings to be supported by the more politically enlightened men, George Mitchell and Mr Whitely. Helen would not let the matter drop, despite certain defeat. She tenaciously followed up with yet another motion that ‘certain certificated assistant mistresses’ should have their salaries increased’ and another that yearly increases for men and women assistant teachers should be the same.¹⁴⁶ Throughout the debates of December 1883, which thrashed out the salary scales, Helen continued to object to differential pay for men and women, putting forward a further four motions on the subject, all lost including a final one that the new salary scales should be put to the teachers and the Board should receive

¹⁴³ See Hollis, *Ladies Elect* and Martin, *Women and the Politics of Schooling*. Both books ignore, for the most part, the alliances between men and women, concentrating on the bonds between women board members instead.

¹⁴⁴ John Lobb, *Pen and Ink Sketches of Members of the London School Board*, p. 8.

¹⁴⁵ *School Board Minutes*, 13 December 1883.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 15 December 1883.

a deputation on their behalf. She regarded this as a moral imperative, calling pay parity ‘simple justice’. Young single women, she argued, needed wages at least the same as, if not higher than, those of single men if they were to live independently. They could not live safely alone in the poorer areas as men could.

The new salary scales, which had taken five years before agreement was reached, took up eighteen hours of debate in three sittings in the final month before adoption.¹⁴⁷ They were finally passed at the end of December 1883 and gave all teachers a fixed salary, not dependent on results, and paid head teachers according to the number of pupils in the school rather than the success of the pupils in government tests.¹⁴⁸

The Board then turned its attention to teachers’ pensions through a proposed superannuation scheme which, Helen believed, was grossly unfair to women teachers whose contributions would, she feared, be used to subsidise men in their retirement. Women, she argued, had, as a rule, fewer service years and so should contribute less. They were paying into pensions which they would never draw, having accumulated too few years’ service.¹⁴⁹ Again she couched her unsuccessful appeal to the Board in terms of ‘justice.’¹⁵⁰ Helen not only concerned herself with the remuneration of women teachers but also sought to support their career advancement. She continually campaigned for them to be put in areas of responsibility which society reserved for men. She had an international outlook and cited the success of America, where mixed schools were headed by women

¹⁴⁷ Gautrey, *Lux Mihi Laus School Board Memories*, pp. 139 – 41.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 15 December and 20 December 1883.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 26 July 1884.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 2 August 1884.

(undoubtedly knowledge gleaned from her close friendship with the family of Henry George), and contrasted it with the state of education in Germany where the girls, she claimed, were not inspired to continue education after school through a lack of encouragement from male head teachers.¹⁵¹

Helen also opposed the patriarchal nature of the London School Board itself and the separate spheres which the ruling clique tried to enforce. Her opposition to gender inequality within the Board bureaucracy again gave her the reputation of a difficult personality but was a result of her feminism being at the heart of her public life. She was a strongly independent member of the London School Board, refusing to blindly vote with the Liberals, who consequently opposed her re-election on each occasion.

During the 1880s the London School Board split into progressive (Liberal) and moderate members, the latter strongly opposed to rate increases to pay for London's education and fierce defenders of the church schools.¹⁵² Helen rose above all this and voted independently, as did Florence Fenwick Miller and Elizabeth Surr.

Florence recorded this stance in her memoirs, recounting how she and Helen were genuinely independent members who voted for each policy on its merits, which made them unpopular, as they were 'a thorn in the side of the Party management of affairs.'¹⁵³ They often faced fierce opposition from certain male members who felt they were out of their sphere in being members of the Board and tried to belittle their contribution. Florence recalled how 'some of the gentlemen members of the Board were desirous of keeping the lady members in the inferior position proper to

¹⁵¹ *School Board Chronicle*, 4 August 1883.

¹⁵² Gautrey, *Lux Mihi Laus School Board Memories*, p. 100

¹⁵³ Fenwick Miller, *An Uncommon Girlhood*, p. 927.

their sex.’¹⁵⁴ She cited four separate occasions she had to fight to lead a public meeting. When the Chairman or Vice Chairman of the Board was not in attendance, a meeting would be chaired by the member who had been elected with the most votes in the division in which that meeting was held. Florence had to insist that she, having obtained more votes than any other election candidate in the Hackney division, take the chair at meetings held there, in the face of strong opposition from men present who felt it inappropriate for a woman to do so.

In 1877, when Helen and Florence were first elected, the lady members had to insist on going to the Lord Mayor’s dinner at the Mansion House to which all School Board members were invited. They were told that they were invited on the presumption that they would decline and plead a prior engagement, as women members had in the past. Helen and Florence stood their ground, refused to pretend they were otherwise engaged, and attended the dinner.¹⁵⁵ In doing so they had indicated that they would not accept the gendered roles assigned to them as women by patriarchal male members. The women insisted they were to be treated as equals. Their position as elected representatives gave them the power to challenge the separate spheres ideology within this important public body. The conduct of meetings favoured the male members and the feminists challenged this male dominance of proceedings.

Florence recounted the disadvantage the women members encountered during meetings which in practice favoured masculine attributes, such as forwardness in debate. She wrote of how Helen secretly made a note for three months of how long

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 949.

¹⁵⁵ Fenwick Miller, *An Uncommon Girlhood*, p. 950.

each member spoke and proved that the men were much more talkative. Helen showed her humour in publicly drawing attention to how men controlled the meetings, declaring that Mr Stanley had spoken forty times as long as all the women put together, and describing him as having ‘forty women speaking power.’ There was a serious point to be made in her observations, as meetings were lengthy affairs and the Board was always seen by the public as wasting rate payers’ money throughout the whole of its thirty-three year history.¹⁵⁶ Buxton, the Chairman, in his Annual Report in October 1883, revealed that, on average, the weekly Board meetings in the previous twelve months had lasted 4 hours 37 minutes in comparison to 3 hours 15 minutes in 1879–80.¹⁵⁷ The ‘forty women speaking power’ Mr Stanley was certainly no ally of the lady members and their desire to be treated as equals. His praise of them - after all the women were co-opted onto the School Management Committee - was somewhat patronising and carried the clear message that their feminist objectives were to the detriment of the work of the Board. He feared this Committee was

... somewhat over weighted by the Trade Union spirit of the lady members ... Their tendencies in small matters of school management were towards expense. They were too ready to support large salaries for the female teachers. The ladies did very intelligent and useful work in the committee and their influence was most desirable but it could not be denied that they were a phalanx who were bound together for certain objects.¹⁵⁸

In 1883 Helen lost a motion to limit the time for which each member could continuously speak to five minutes.¹⁵⁹ Elizabeth Surr, in 1877, had put forward an unsuccessful motion to have the Board room clock moved so that it could be seen by

¹⁵⁶ Gautry, *Lux Mihi Laus. School Board Memories*, p. 31.

¹⁵⁷ *School Board Chronicle*, 6 October 1883.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 14 February 1880.

¹⁵⁹ *School Board Minutes*, 24 July 1883.

every member, to stop certain male members rising to speak with ‘fluent verbosity’ on matters that had already been discussed and repeated three or four times. She drew attention to the gender differences in how men and the women conducted themselves in meetings:

Why gentlemen, if we ladies, whose silence has hitherto been almost golden, and who are supposed to have such a free use of the unruly member, were to follow such an example our debates would be protracted till late in the evening.¹⁶⁰

Helen demanded efficiency for the Board and lengthy debates were at the rate payers’ expense. Early on in her School Board career Helen had tried to simplify the Board’s business with a defeated motion that no resolution passed by the Board could be altered within five months unless a two-thirds majority should vote in favour.¹⁶¹ Helen first and foremost tried to bring to attention that they were in public service and accountable to the people who had elected them. The advancement and upholding of democracy was always utmost in her mind. Her intellectual and moral inheritance, as the step-daughter of the revered John Stuart Mill, was ever present in her behaviour.

As well as a gender divide there was a power divide between those inside and outside the privileged inner circle on the Board who had control of policy. This ‘official ring’, as it was known, excluded both women and men, the important difference being that all of the former and only some of the latter were excluded. Women’s experiences on the elected authority were limited by their sex, men’s by their politics and ability to network. Florence returned time and time again in her memoirs to the fact that there was

¹⁶⁰ *School Board Chronicle*, 13 January 1887.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*, 10 November 1887.

...an official ring which exercised an arbitrary authority and gave no heed to any suggestions or representations coming from outside the ring.¹⁶²

She believed that the will of the majority of the Board members was thwarted by committees in which the ring exercised its power and which resulted in 'expenditure of considerable sums of money by committees without the authority of the Board.'¹⁶³ The ring, as Florence saw it, was 'a party of members who voted rather for each other than for principles' and that it was discouraging to other Board members in that it 'was calculated to discourage outside members who saw no hope of breaking into the charmed circle.'¹⁶⁴ Helen and other members often openly challenged this inner, privileged, patriarchal undemocratic circle, exercising usurped authority in an elected organisation. When Helen, unsuccessfully, supported a motion to rescind the appointment of a drawing instructor because of perceived irregularities in his appointment, she gloried in that paying damages to the candidate, for the withdrawal of his contract, would be worth it 'as it would be an example to the official ring of the Board' that they could not appoint without propriety in their dealings.¹⁶⁵ A male maverick member of the Board, John Lobb, wrote a series of pamphlets exposing extravagance and mismanagement within the Board in which he vilified the 'official ring.' He described it as

...a sort of 'inner circle', whose definite aim was the centralisation in themselves of all the power, patronage and expenditure of the Board; they wanted the control of everything, in addition to being the chairmen of all the committees and subcommittees.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² Fenwick Miller, *An Uncommon Girlhood*, p. 632.

¹⁶³ *School Board Chronicle*, 28 October 1882.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 7 April 1883.

¹⁶⁵ *School Board Chronicle*, 14 October 1882.

¹⁶⁶ John Lobb, *Extravagance and Mismanagement of the London School Board*, pp. 4, 9.

The ring, therefore, was not just patriarchal men wielding power over women members, but a group of men wielding undemocratic power in a democratic organisation. They had corrupted democracy.

Not all women supported these attacks on the ‘inner circle.’ John Lobb identified Miss Davenport Hill as a supporter, describing how she ‘felt keenly the breakup of the official ring’ after the 1885 election.¹⁶⁷ Helen used her last Board meeting for a final attack on the ‘official ring’, when she ‘proceeded at considerable length to impugn the impartiality of the Chairman, amidst frequent and general remonstrance from the majority of the other members present.’¹⁶⁸ She attacked Mr Buxton for lacking the necessary objectivity of his post, amid uproar of ‘oh ohs’ in the meeting room, accusing him of being ‘the mere mouthpiece of the most unfair, the most partial, most rude “Ring” that ever a Board exhibited’ and in doing so, she continued, he had brought the Board into disrepute ‘and risked the cause of education in London.’ Buxton was to find himself removed from the chairmanship after the elections of 1885 by the new intake and replaced by the Rev Diggle.¹⁶⁹

Women members faced disapproval of their membership of the Board outside as well as inside the boardroom and a certain amount of misogyny for their challenge to the separate spheres ideology. Among Helen’s papers are preserved a couple of pieces of hate mail. The first accuses an unnamed lady member (Helen, we presume) of wanton behaviour in leaving the dinner to celebrate her election in the company of a drunken male member and is signed ‘a lay elector in Southwark’. The other accuses her of having unsexed herself by her public work:

¹⁶⁷ John Lobb, *Pen and Ink Sketches of Members of the London School Board 1888*, p. 8.

¹⁶⁸ *School Board Chronicle*, 21 November 1885.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 5 December 1885.

HT
Disgusting creature
Man in Petticoats
Satan's masterpiece
Her end
Destruction¹⁷⁰

Certainly the ladies of the London School Board did not take their rightful places as elected representatives on this new democratic public body without serious challenges to them from both within and without the organisation. These were challenges that women like Helen, Florence and Elizabeth were determined to meet.

Challenging separate spheres through a feminism of sexual difference: women's moral superiority and political agency

As we have seen, Helen openly resisted the prevailing social mores of what constituted acceptable roles for girls and women in Victorian society by challenging gendered practices in education in order to obtain sexual equality. At other times, however, she bought into the Victorian concept of womanhood in order to wield political influence within the accepted social construct that women were morally superior to men and thus their contribution improved political life morally by decreasing corruption in public life. It was a feminism of sexual difference which subverted the accepted gender roles, of women as carers and the teachers of morality to their families, to the advantage of women in public life. You need us in your public bodies, the feminists would assert, because we are intrinsically morally superior. As explained earlier, the use of 'feminist' in regard to these women does not equate with the modern-day use which often sees the differences between men and women as being socially constructed. Feminists with views like Helen's believed that women and men were different and that without women's inherent moral goodness democracy would never be lifted out of the corruption they believed

¹⁷⁰ Letter dated 15 January 1877, MTC, file 15, no. 100.

it was mired in. Helen, herself, was a member and later Honourable Secretary of the Moral Reform Union.¹⁷¹ The social discourse of the 1880s (and indeed earlier) assumed that men and women have different attributes and characters through nature rather than nurture; this essentialist view of sexual difference was shared by the majority of Victorian feminists. Women were universally accepted as being morally superior to men by Anglican and non-conformists alike. This certainty of female moral supremacy had given women ‘a sense of mission, spiritual worth and strong incentive’ which led to them involving themselves, outside the home, in philanthropic work.¹⁷²

The women on the London School Board drew upon this confidence in their role as moral crusaders to legitimise their political work in the public world of educational legislation, thus extending their sphere of influence from the philanthropic to the overtly political. This is illustrated through an examination of Helen’s campaigns for transparency and fairness in contracts and appointments within the School Board, her work to expose abuses, extravagances and malpractices within both the elected administration and the schools, her campaign to end corporal punishment, her opposition to the money spent on the Shaftesbury training ship and her work with Elizabeth Surr to expose cruelty and neglect in the industrial schools. The accepted Victorian social construct of women as natural protectors of children was used by Helen and her women colleagues to validate their public work and thus navigate the separate spheres ideology. Thus the women Board members took up these causes whilst insisting to a patriarchal bureaucracy that it was their natural proclivity to do so. Whereas, when challenging pay differentials between men and

¹⁷¹ See Chapter 5.

¹⁷² Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast* (London, 1995), p. 52.

women, Helen was resisting women's limited social expectations, at other times, as in her campaigns against corporal punishment in schools on moral grounds, she was able to call for change from within the normal expectations of a woman's duty. Therefore, when a male teacher was appointed over a mixed department of boys and girls at the Berger School Helen protested that a woman should have been appointed, as she would have had a greater moral influence on the children.¹⁷³ Whilst appealing for the advancement of women she did so using the accepted wisdom of women as a morally superior force in society when she compared the successful running of a truant school in Liverpool, headed by a woman, to Upton House School in London, headed by a man, which had been found to have been abusing pupils. The feminists of the *English Women's Review* regarded women School Board members as bringing much needed feminine values to the new organisations; it was an extension of their rightful role in society as domestic angels rather than a revolutionary advance:

The presence of a lady is sufficient sometimes to humanise a whole Board of Directors and the matters that come under the jurisdiction of the Boards require much temper, tact and patience to manage them rightly.¹⁷⁴

Contracts, Appointments and Prudent Spending: The Demand for Morality.

Helen's opposition to a lack of transparency in contracts and appointments and to what she deemed to be profligate spending of public money was politically motivated (for open tendering was a Democratic Federation manifesto pledge), but equally she saw it as a matter of morality in public life and thereby within the sphere of influence for women. Her belief that the London School Board, as a democratically elected body, should be accountable to the public led her to oppose

¹⁷³ *School Board Chronicle*, 19 July 1879.

¹⁷⁴ *The English Woman's Review*, June 1879.

what she deemed as unnecessary spending projects and unfair contracts and teaching appointments. In 1880 she seconded a successful motion by James Jones, calling on the Board to rescind the contract they had granted to level the playground at Upton House School on the grounds that the work should be put out to public tender.¹⁷⁵ When the Board passed a motion to instruct the Works Committee to build a replacement for this same school, Helen tried, unsuccessfully, to have the contract put out to tender.¹⁷⁶ She failed in a further attempt to have the building of a new school in Kilburn Lane, Chelsea, referred back to the Works Committee for the advertising of open tenders.¹⁷⁷

Whether it was insisting on tendering for coal supplies¹⁷⁸ or urging greater economy in the cost of erecting schools, Helen believed that greater savings for the rate payer would be achieved if the Board went about things in a morally and financially responsible manner.¹⁷⁹ The Board rejected her idea of having a blueprint drawn up by an architect for London schools, disliking the uniformity which would result, though Helen maintained that it would save the Board a great deal of expense on school building.¹⁸⁰ There were, she argued, more pressing demands on the money available. In supporting an increase in salary for school visitors she insisted that ‘less money ought to be spent on bricks and mortar and on patronage and more on the useful class of the Board’s officers – the visitors.’¹⁸¹ When the School Board Offices were deemed to need enlarging, a move Helen opposed on the grounds of economy, she tried again, in another failed attempt, to have both the planning and

¹⁷⁵ *School Board Chronicle*, 10 July 1880.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 17 March 1883.

¹⁷⁷ *School Board Minutes*, 16 July 1884.

¹⁷⁸ *School Board Chronicle*, 21 June 1883.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 24 May 1879.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 20 October 1883.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid*, 16 June 1883.

building work put out to tender.¹⁸² She regarded the half penny in the pound it would put on London rates as totally unnecessary.¹⁸³ One of her last motions on the Board, seconded by John Lobb, who had long campaigned publicly for Board accountability, was that the Works Committee should submit all contracts to public tender and all should be openly advertised.¹⁸⁴

Helen challenged not only building expenditure but the way teaching posts were filled. In 1885 when her challenge to the legality of not advertising certain teaching posts was deemed invalid, Helen insisted that her objections be recorded for posterity in the minutes of the meeting.¹⁸⁵

In 1877 the Industrial Schools Committee of the London School Board, chaired by Thomas Scrutton, received a direction from the Board to spend £15,000 on the purchase and fitting out of a ship, the Shaftesbury, to be moored at the mouth of the Thames estuary and used as an Industrial School. This was intended as a training ship which would prepare remanded boys for a sea career. The Industrial Schools Committee reported back to the Board that the ship had been bought for £7,000 and that they expected to be able to refit her for the £8,000 remaining in the budget. In June 1878 Mr Scrutton reported to the Board that the ship was ready for use but that more money was needed to pay the bills for the refit. The Board voted to give the Committee a further £7,000 but held back payment, awaiting a full breakdown of the money spent, after Scrutton could not guarantee that this would pay the outstanding creditors. When the Board was presented with the supposedly final bill

¹⁸² *Ibid*, 2 June 1883.

¹⁸³ *Ibid*, 24 February 1883.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 17 October 1885.

¹⁸⁵ *School Board Chronicle*, 28 March 1885.

for the purchase and refit of the ship on 3 July 1878 it was found to be £37,038. Even this estimate was too low and was found to have been actually in excess of £40,000 by an Enquiry Committee of the London School Board on which Florence sat. This enquiry found that public money had been abused and wasted, for instance the Industrial Schools Committee had fitted out the Captain's cabin with expensive Chippendale chairs and also, when ordering oriental rugs for the same, two or three committee members had taken advantage of a discounted price to buy the rugs for themselves. The enquiry censured the committee for fitting out the captain's quarters with such extravagance. An independent expert in shipbuilding gave evidence to the enquiry that the ship could have been refitted for twenty five per cent less with the proper use of tenders for contracts, instead of the Industrial Schools Committee entering into private arrangements with suppliers.¹⁸⁶

Helen had seconded the resolution early in 1879, tabled by Elizabeth Surr, which had resulted in money for the Shaftesbury being retained until after the Enquiry Committee published its report and she called for

...some check on this lavish expenditure, going as far to say that the Board should not pay the outstanding bills as they had not sanctioned the expense.¹⁸⁷

Helen, Elizabeth Surr and Florence Fenwick Miller were to the fore in the spring of that year in keeping up the pressure as regards the scandal and the part played by Mr Scrutton as chair of the committee responsible for such a large overspend in terms of the moral ineptitude of those who had sanctioned such waste. Helen claimed that almost half of the expense incurred was unnecessary and called to task those members of the Industrial Schools Committee who had taken lunch on the

¹⁸⁶ This paragraph is taken from information given by Fenwick Miller, *An Uncommon Girlhood*, pp. 929–30.

¹⁸⁷ *School Board Chronicle*, 1 February 1879.

ship at public expense: ‘Those members who refused to allow the poor parents to have free schooling went down to the ship and regaled themselves to the tune of three shillings for a lunch.’ It was to Helen nothing less than immorality in public life and she saw it as her duty to expose it. Mr Buxton was moved to insist that there was no reason why members should not have had a free lunch but Helen continued to insist that it was ‘a scandalous practice.’¹⁸⁸ When Mr Scrutton called for the Board to fund an extra assistant master post on the Shaftesbury, due to an increase in trainee numbers, Helen protested that now was not the time for increased expenditure on the ship due to public outrage at the overspend.¹⁸⁹ For the month of November 1880 the cost of the training ship ran to over nine hundred pounds and Helen drew the attention of the Board to this. Two years later, she moved an amendment that the cost of the Shaftesbury refit should be paid for by existing ratepayers in one year rather than burdening future generations for a ship which would have ceased to exist, but was heavily defeated.¹⁹⁰ In addition, following the purchase of sea boots for the boys on the Shaftesbury, Helen suggested irregularities, insisting on knowing how they were tendered for and suggesting that Mr Pocock, who supplied them, had won the contract by subscribing to the election expenses of a Board member, Miss Richardson. She later retracted that she had implied any impropriety against Miss Richardson but stood by her unease at the possible way Pocock had won the contract.¹⁹¹

In Helen Taylor’s continual criticism of the cost of the Shaftesbury’s refit is clearly seen her desire to bring a higher standard of accountability in fiscal matters into the

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 29 March 1879 and 5 April 1879.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 5 July 1879.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 14 May 1881. She lost by 20 votes to 8.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid*, 2 June 1883.

School Board though prudent housekeeping, which any Victorian woman running home would understand. Helen's campaign for accountable local government laid the groundwork for our modern-day standards in public life. Such Victorian pioneers as Helen exposed any hint of corrupt practice and insisted on high moral standards of fairness and decency for all and for the new public bodies to be truly accountable to those who elected and paid for them.

The Campaign against Corporal Punishment

In their campaigns against corporal punishment in schools the female Board members brought society's belief in women's natural nurturing essence into the elected chamber. In supporting the abolition of beatings in schools Helen was also carrying on the work of her mother and step-father, who had been vocal in exposing domestic violence and corporal punishment. Harriet and Mill had written a series of articles for the *Morning Chronicle* in 1850 exposing the physical and emotional abuse of women within marriage, perpetrated by husbands and sanctioned by the law. They also wrote on physical abuse of children by their parents.¹⁹² The Taylor Mills had anonymously published a pamphlet critiquing Henry Fitzroy's Bill of 1853, *The Bill for the Better Prevention and Punishment of Assaults on Women and Children*.¹⁹³ They welcomed the legislation but regarded it as merely a first step and called on the criminal justice system to regard violence against the person as seriously as violence against property and highlighted the importance of education in reducing physical brutality:

¹⁹² See H. Taylor & J.S. Mill, 'The Suicide of Sarah Brown,' 'The Case of Anne Bird,' 'The Case of Susan Moir' and 'Wife Murder' in Robson & Robson (eds), *Sexual Equality*, pp. 53-56, 66-70, 78-81 and 87-91.

¹⁹³ H. Taylor and J.S. Mill, 'Remarks on Mr Fitzroy's Bill for the More Effectual Prevention of Assaults on Women and Children' in Robson & Robson (eds), *Sexual Equality*, pp. 91-8.

Whatever else may be included in the education of the people, the first essential of it is to unbrutalise them; and to this end, all kinds of personal brutality should be seen and felt to be things which the law is determined to put down.¹⁹⁴

Thus Helen had lived in a household which had discussed violence in society and concluded that much of it resulted from the unequal power structures between men and women. Opposing corporal punishment in schools was a natural result of her upbringing and intellectual development and had society's seal of approval, since caring for the welfare of a child was a feminine attribute, an extension of being 'the angel in the house'.

Organizations had been established to oppose the use of the birch in schools and Helen was in contact with them throughout her School Board years. Shortly after her first election she was in correspondence with the educationalist W.F. Collier, who had written a pamphlet opposing corporal punishment in schools.¹⁹⁵ In 1879 J.W. Bradley wrote to her, requesting that he be allowed to add her name to the list of members of the Council of the Association for the Abolition of Corporal Punishment.¹⁹⁶ The prevailing myth that corporal punishment in schools was accepted as a necessity by the Victorians, who are associated in modern minds with the phrase 'spare the rod and spoil the child,' has been challenged in recent years and it has been asserted that the Victorians continuously debated the validity of its use in schools and that it was never as widely accepted as previously assumed.¹⁹⁷ There was, in fact, growing unease about its use in education following the trial of

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 97.

¹⁹⁵ W.F. Collier to Helen Taylor, 16 September 1877, MTC, file 15, no. 39.

¹⁹⁶ J.W. Bradley to Helen Taylor, 12 August 1879 MTC, file 15, no. 21.

¹⁹⁷ Jacob Middleton, 'Spare the Rod,' *History Today*, vol. 62 (11), 2012, pp. 5-6, p.6. Middleton asserts that corporal punishment in Victorian state schools was unpopular amongst parents and teachers but was kept as policy because the judges and politicians, who had received physical punishment as children in their public schools, supported it as character-forming. Thus a public school ethos was forced on state education, though not without protest.

Thomas Hopley in 1860 for the manslaughter of a pupil at his school. Hopley's trial has been described as a watershed in attitudes to corporal punishment in schools, since the movement for its abolition grew following the case.¹⁹⁸ In 1871 School Board member Professor Huxley had succeeded in setting firm boundaries for the administering of corporal punishment in the capital's schools.¹⁹⁹ The London School Board accepted the decision of the First Report of the Scheme of Education Committee's recommendations, headed by Huxley, concerning the use of physical chastisement in schools:

In treating of school discipline, the Committee placed on record their conviction, that although corporal punishment might be necessary in exceptional cases, 'the frequent use of corporal punishment is a mark of incompetency on the part of the teacher;' and it is provided, in accordance with this principle, that such punishment shall never be inflicted except by the head teacher, or without any entry therefore being made in a book. All these regulations appear to have been approved by the Board with little or no debate.²⁰⁰

Helen, therefore, took her seat on a Board which had already set legal boundaries as to the extent to which physical punishment could be administered in its elementary schools. Pupil teachers were banned from its use and no punishment could go unrecorded. The women Board members were, in general, opposed to physical punishment and it was they who spearheaded the campaign for abolition, though Mrs West approved of its use 'for lying and insubordination.'²⁰¹ Elizabeth Surr had spoken up against its 'brutalizing effect' shortly after her election.²⁰² Helen, too, had early registered her disapproval, calling for an end to the birching of girls.²⁰³ Following the death of a boy who had been hit by a pupil teacher, Helen put a

¹⁹⁸ J. Middleton, 'Thomas Hopley and mid-Victorian attitudes to corporal punishment', in *History of Education*, 34, no. 6 (2005), pp. 599-615.

¹⁹⁹ *Lloyds Weekly Newspaper*, 25 June 1871.

²⁰⁰ *The Bury and Norwich Post and Suffolk Herald*, 27 June 1871.

²⁰¹ *School Board Chronicle*, 2 November 1878.

²⁰² *Ibid*, 17 February 1877.

²⁰³ *Ibid*, 12 May 1877.

motion to the Board that any pupil teachers convicted of hitting a child should be dismissed and should not have their legal expenses paid. This was ruled not to be in order, as the Board did not pay legal expenses, and it was dropped.²⁰⁴ A later motion by Elizabeth, seconded by Helen, called for the abolition of corporal punishment for girls and infants. Elizabeth drew the Board's attention to the brutal home life of many children and the fact that girls were being caned on the hand for lateness, when they had been kept at home by their mothers to mind the baby.²⁰⁵ Helen and Elizabeth were disappointed by the lack of support for their motion, the debate on which was adjourned on a number of occasions. Elizabeth lamented, as the debate closed and the motion was lost,

...the general stampede of members to the adjourning tea rooms which had taken place when she had first introduced this most important question.²⁰⁶

The corporal punishment question was clearly a gendered interest, left to the women members and ignored by the majority of the men. Undeterred, Helen put forward a motion early in 1879, calling for the abolition of corporal punishment in all London state schools.²⁰⁷ The editorial in the *School Board Chronicle*, a newspaper which always found Helen at the least eccentric, if not downright wrongheaded, could not support its abolition, for it would result, the publication claimed, in the teacher finding himself 'at the mercy of perverse and ill-bred children.'²⁰⁸

Helen, as often throughout her campaigns, showed herself to be well versed in what was happening throughout the world. Sweden and France had already banned corporal punishment in their schools, she informed the Board, as she quoted from a

²⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 10 August 1878.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 19 October 1878.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 2 November 1878.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 15 February 1879.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 22 February 1879.

recent publication on eye diseases and claimed children were being punished for stupidity when the problem was their eyesight.²⁰⁹ After the summer recess of 1882 Helen again motioned for the abolition of corporal punishment, seconded by Benjamin Lucraft, again citing France, Belgium, Switzerland and Sweden as countries ahead of Britain in this matter and claiming she knew of three cases in which a child had lost a finger as a result of having been caned. The debate was adjourned but she was able to put forward the case that showing children ‘that they would be taught by reason and kindness alone’ would improve attendance.²¹⁰ During the election campaign, late in 1882, she cited one of her goals as the end of corporal punishment.²¹¹

After 1882 corporal punishment appears to have gone off the Board’s agenda as the Board dealt with the growing demand for free schools, the aftermath of the Industrial School scandals and the long drawn out reworking of teacher’s pay and superannuation. Also, Helen herself was by that time heavily involved in the question of the use of educational endowments as the Chair of the Educational Endowments Committee. Child welfare, however, remained high on reformers’ list of priorities. This is evidenced by the formation of the London Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in 1884, which quickly became the NSPCC which we have today, though physical punishment of children in British state schools would continue until the 1980s.²¹²

²⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 5 February 1881.

²¹⁰ *Ibid*, 14 October 1882.

²¹¹ *School Board Election Leaflet 1882*, MTC, box 8.

²¹² *A Pocket History of the NSPCC*, <http://www.nspcc.org.uk>.

The campaign against child abuse in London's industrial schools

Industrial schools, relying on private philanthropy and voluntary organizations, had been set up following the Youthful Offenders Act of 1854 and received public money for the upkeep of offenders admitted to them by the Magistrates Courts. Further Acts of Parliament in 1857 and 1866 saw the Home Office taking over the supervision of the schools.²¹³ In 1870 the London School Board assumed this responsibility for the industrial schools of the metropolis and the children whom they sent to them:

All these children were committed by the Magistrates to the custody and care of the School Board, for all sorts of petty offences, from being “found wandering” or being “beyond parental control” up to doing wilful damage or committing small thefts. They were kept in Industrial schools until they reached sixteen years of age.²¹⁴

Helen, Elizabeth Surr and Florence Fenwick Miller campaigned endlessly to expose the mistreatment and abuse of boys at two industrial schools in London, Upton House and St Paul's. Elizabeth first drew the Board's attention to the regime at Upton House after she visited and found the institution to have no fires lit, just plain wooden boards and boys wearing no shoes.²¹⁵ She kept up the pressure but the Board was, at first, deaf to her demands for action and an end to such cruelty. Helen berated the Board for how Elizabeth's concerns had been ‘laughed to scorn’ and how ‘it was upon such occasions as these that the value of a few simple feminine qualities were made patent.’²¹⁶ Here is seen the feminist belief that men and women were different and that women were in public life for their feminine qualities, in that they were morally superior. Again, it had been left to the women to raise moral

²¹³ Information from <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/catalogue/DisplayCatalogueDetails.asp?CATID=7904&CATLN=3&FullDetails=True>.

²¹⁴ Fenwick Miller, *An Uncommon Girlhood*, p. 928.

²¹⁵ *School Board Chronicle*, 5 April 1879.

²¹⁶ *Ibid*, 12 July 1879.

questions which the majority of men wanted to ignore. The women were within their accepted sphere of influence. Helen called Labour Master Neish, who had disappeared following these allegations, a 'though brute' for his beating of boys and tabled a successful motion that the report on the school, which it had been agreed to compile, should be printed and supplied to every Board member.²¹⁷ She attempted, unsuccessfully, for the Board to start legal proceedings against Governor Haddon and Neish for 'breach of trust in the infliction of cruel punishment.'²¹⁸ Helen believed that many decent children were in the industrial schools. Often they were the children of widows who had to go out to work and their unsupervised children were picked up roaming the streets and sent to reform schools.²¹⁹ She argued that ordinary elementary schools should accommodate industrial school pupils.²²⁰ If the Board were to continue to use reform schools she appealed to them to consider setting up their own day industrial schools, for she alleged that the voluntary, Roman Catholic and Church of England reform schools were badly managed and uneconomical.²²¹

Helen was ever a supporter of the right of London's street children to receive a decent education rather than be condemned to the industrial school system as vagrants. She had accused the head teacher of London Fields School of using absenteeism as a way of getting poor children off the school roll. This school had, she claimed, removed children from the school register after an absence of one week rather than the two weeks legally required:

²¹⁷ *School Board Chronicle*, 12 July 1879.

²¹⁸ *School Board Minutes*, 23 July 1879.

²¹⁹ *School Board Chronicle*, 26 February 1881.

²²⁰ *The School Master*, 30 June 1883, MTC, box 6.

²²¹ *School Board Chronicle*, 7 August 1880 and 16 October 1880.

‘Teachers all over London were trying to present satisfactory reports by getting rid of street children and attracting children from other schools; and they would do so if they were not watched one by one.’²²²

Elizabeth uncovered such a catalogue of abuse at St Paul’s Industrial School that Helen, Florence and herself became determined to do something about it. Elizabeth and Helen became school visitors for St Paul’s in 1879 and Helen also visited twice in 1882 because children from her constituency, Southwark, had been sent there. Elizabeth resolved to bring abuse at the school to public attention after two boys set fire to it. These boys claimed they acted as they did because of the harsh conditions at the school.²²³ Helen paid for the successful defence of the boys and Elizabeth attended their trial, first at the Thames Police Court and then when the case was sent to the Old Bailey. Elizabeth gave evidence on behalf of the boys on the appalling conditions at St Paul’s, evidence of which she had collected from boy witnesses at the school.²²⁴ She wrote to Helen, regretting that she had not had the opportunity to have all her witnesses heard, especially lamenting that she could not bring to light the case of the boy who ‘had been kept nine days on bread and water with hands and feet manacled.’²²⁵

Helen was asked by Elizabeth’s daughter Minnie to find work for the father of one of the boys, so that the boy could be released into the care of his parent.²²⁶ The school was a Church of England school to which the London School Board sent remanded boys, in return for which the school received public money. Scrutton, the

²²² *Ibid*, 3 August 1878.

²²³ *School Board Chronicle*, 1 July 1882.

²²⁴ Elizabeth wrote to the *London Standard* on 16 November 1881, saying that, although she had arranged for a lawyer to defend the children accused of arson, it was Helen, ‘warmly interested in all helpless children’, who had paid the legal expenses incurred.

²²⁵ Elizabeth Surr to Helen Taylor, 20 September 1881, MTC, file 23, no. 678.

²²⁶ Minnie Surr to Helen Taylor, 14 October 1881, MTC, file 23, no. 689.

Chairman of the London School Board's Industrial Schools Committee, was also manager of this school. That today would be regarded as an unacceptable conflict of interest; many felt uncomfortable about it at the time.²²⁷

Elizabeth Surr alleged that the children were malnourished and experienced great cruelty, in that they were punished by having both hands and feet handcuffed and locked in cold rooms for days at a time. They were forced to carry beds on their heads and endured cold weather without shoes, jackets or bedding.²²⁸ In March 1881 Helen seconded Elizabeth's unsuccessful motion to remove all the Board's children from St Paul's Industrial School. This Scrutton dismissed as mere 'timewasting' by the women.²²⁹ However, the women stuck to the task and the Chairman's report to the Board at the opening session of October 1881 stated that, following the allegations of child cruelty at St Paul's, a committee was to be set up to enquire into it. Elizabeth and Scrutton could not sit on this committee, as they would be accuser and plaintiff; but Helen was successful in getting Elizabeth permission to interview the called witnesses. However, an attempt to get Helen onto the committee failed.²³⁰

The committee of enquiry heard a catalogue of mistreatment and excessive punishment from boy witnesses.²³¹ The debates on the alleged cruelty at the school resulted in an editorial in *The School Board Chronicle*, always a firm promoter of the School Board system, which took the opportunity to lay the blame on the

²²⁷ *School Board Chronicle*, 22 October 1881.

²²⁸ *Ibid*, 5 November 1881.

²²⁹ *Ibid*, 19 March 1881.

²³⁰ *Ibid*, 8 October 1881, 15 October 1881 and 29 October 1881.

²³¹ See *The Minutes of evidence taken before a Special Committee re Upton House Industrial School*, 21 May 1879.

voluntary sector and the conflict of interest in Scrutton being both Chair of the Industrial Schools Committee and a manager at the school.²³²

It was during this time that Helen began an attack on Scrutton which would result in her being charged with libel. She had already crossed swords with him over the Shaftesbury, and once she had taken against someone she could be unstoppable in pursuit of what she deemed to be moral justice. She saw things very much as black and white with no shades of grey in between, which made her many enemies.

Helen's enemies loathed her but her friends loved and supported her and she had a huge working-class following. Helen informed the Board of her intention to put a motion that the Board's Solicitor should begin proceedings against Scrutton for fraud in relation to his having charged the Board for boys who were not at the school on the days the charges pertained to.²³³ She had discussed this course of action with Elizabeth Surr, knowing the motion would be unsuccessful, but showing her shrewdness as a political player, as her intention was to bring the matter to public attention.²³⁴ Many members felt that this was a libellous motion. The *School Board Chronicle* did not print exactly what the motion was to be but reported that Helen refused to withdraw it when asked to.²³⁵ Helen herself had visited the Finance Department of the School Board to check the vouchers for payment of pupils against attendance.²³⁶ The Special Committee of Enquiry, after Scrutton had admitted failures in the management of the school, proposed that there should be twelve school managers, including two School Board members and three to be nominated

²³² *School Board Chronicle*, 22 October 1881.

²³³ *School Board Minutes*, 27 October 1881.

²³⁴ Helen Taylor to Elizabeth Surr, 24 October 1881, MTC, file 23, no. 680.

²³⁵ *School Board Chronicle*, 29 October 1881.

²³⁶ Helen Taylor to Elizabeth Surr, 24 October 1881, MTC, file 23, no. 681.

by Elizabeth, followed by a complete change of school staff.²³⁷ Helen demanded better supervision of all industrial schools and campaigned during the 1882 School Board elections for ‘the open supervision of Industrial schools.’²³⁸ Elizabeth called on Scrutton to resign after the Home Office withdrew its certificate from St Paul’s, following the School Board enquiry, which resulted in its closure rather than the reform which had been initially intended by the Board.

The Home Office, much to the dismay of Helen, Florence and Elizabeth, concluded that there was not enough evidence for a criminal prosecution. Others on the Board also found this decision of the Government unfathomable. Benjamin Lucraft supported the women and protested at the failure to start criminal proceedings against the school managers. The Board’s inquiry had heard how ‘handcuffs and manacles were found in the cupboard at the school and surely somebody was guilty.’²³⁹ Florence wrote to the Home Secretary that the Committee had not heard all the evidence available but to no avail, though a Royal Commission was appointed to enquire into conditions in industrial schools.²⁴⁰

By this time Helen was being sued for libel by Scrutton for having publicly accused him of manslaughter of pupils under his care. She remained unrepentant, refusing to withdraw her allegations, and publicly proclaiming that St Paul’s had been run for profit. She appealed to the Board to defend the children in its care in terms of the moral superiority of women, to applause from her supporters in the public gallery:

She had done her public duty to her own electors, to London and to the children of England. She had stated outside the Board that Scrutton was morally guilty of

²³⁷ *School Board Chronicle*, 12 November 1881.

²³⁸ *Ibid*, 2 May 1885 and 1882, and election handbill, MTC, box 8.

²³⁹ *School Board Chronicle*, 14 January 1882.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 19 November 1881, 14 January 1882 and 21 January 1882.

the crime of manslaughter...She was free as a member of the board, and as something better, as a straightforward English woman.²⁴¹

Scrutton resigned from the Board in May 1882, a move which was regretted in an editorial in the *School Board Chronicle*, which declared him one of ‘the hardest working, most zealous and most devoted members.’ Scrutton’s resignation, though, was celebrated by many on the Board who held him totally responsible as manager for the (lack of) care of the boys in his school.²⁴² When the Board’s Chairman moved to send Scrutton a letter of regret at accepting his resignation Mr Bonnewell called it hypocrisy ‘when the majority of the board were glad he had gone.’²⁴³

In June 1882 Helen’s libel case came to court. Scrutton was claiming damages of £10,000 while Helen refused to withdraw her claim and declared privilege, in that the letter which contained the allegation had been on official School Board business. The prosecution was a result of a letter Helen had sent to a Mr Upton, the promoter of a public meeting in November 1881, which had been held to discuss the scandal in Tower Hamlets, the London Division represented by Scrutton. Helen had been unable to attend, being in Ireland working for the Ladies’ Land League, but had written a letter from Dublin, an extract from which had been read out to those assembled and the whole text published later in the press. In it she had declared that Scrutton was guilty of the manslaughter of boys in his care at the school, for he had ‘supplied some of the miserable adulterated food himself to the school and there can be little doubt in my mind that the children were kept there only to make money by their work.’ Scrutton had asked Helen to publicly withdraw these allegations but she had refused and had, in fact, repeated the charges against him at a Board meeting on

²⁴¹ *Ibid*, 21 January 1882.

²⁴² *Ibid*, 6 May 1882.

²⁴³ *School Board Chronicle*, 13 May 1882.

19 January 1882 and on 7 March at a divisional meeting in Bermondsey, where she publicly accused him of the manslaughter of thirteen boys. During the trial she continued to maintain that Scrutton had charged for boys not at the school.²⁴⁴ She would not back down and declared to the court that:

...every kind of wanton cruelty was carried on year after year in that school by the authority of a man who calls himself a Christian and a philanthropist.²⁴⁵

The trial finished in anti-climax as Helen's barrister advised her she could not win the case and should settle, which she did, paying Scrutton £1,000, though she would not retract her allegations.²⁴⁶ Her friend and political colleague, Henry George, writing in the Irish-American paper the *Irish World*, felt she had been let down by choosing to be represented by an old family solicitor, who George felt had presented the case badly to a jury which numbered some friends of Scrutton and had left her no choice but to settle. During the trial the lawyer for the prosecution drew the jury's attention to her activities in the Irish Land League against the British Government which was, George concluded, evidence of an unfair trial. Helen left the court, George wrote, to the applause of the working class in attendance.²⁴⁷

In his summing-up the Judge said that there had been no malice on Helen's part and that the ladies on the School Board had acted in the best interest of the children, which was acknowledgement by the establishment of their right to act publicly in this way. They were within their gendered sphere. Helen's supporters formed a committee to raise the thousand pounds through public subscription which she had

²⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 1 July 1882. This edition had a full report on the trial, as had the daily and local newspapers.

²⁴⁵ *The Times*, 28 June 1882.

²⁴⁶ *School Board Chronicle*, 1 July 1882.

²⁴⁷ Henry George writing in *The Irish World*, 5 August 1882.

agreed to pay to Scrutton, in return for the case being dropped.²⁴⁸ Her friend and fellow suffragist Priscilla McLaren wrote to her in support:

I was thankful to see that you had the sympathy of outsiders and that you were so warmly cheered when you left the court...I hope you will not have to pay one farthing of the £1000.²⁴⁹

Helen felt she had been vindicated and that she had won a moral victory. An undated piece of writing amongst her papers indicates her happiness at having been successful in holding Scrutton to account for the wrongdoings at the school. She was glad that:

I am considered to have treated Scrutton badly. No wonder he and his friends 'feel bad' for I certainly did drive him off the school board and shut up his profitable Do the Boys Hall and make him pay out several thousand pounds of his dearly beloved money.²⁵⁰

In conclusion, Helen's nine years on the London School Board reveal that whilst the women of the Board faced patriarchal attitudes and behaviour and opposition to their demands for gender equality, they did have political agency. Sometimes they openly challenged gendered practices, such as in the curriculum, whilst at other times they used society's construction of women as 'the angel in the home' and natural nurturers of the young to work for child welfare, as in their campaigns against corporal punishment.

The election of women to this important public body illustrates the truth of historians' claims that women led more diverse lives than a strict adherence to the

²⁴⁸ *The Times*, 1 July 1882.

²⁴⁹ Priscilla McLaren to Helen Taylor, 1 July 1882, MTC, file 13, no. 231.

²⁵⁰ Fragment in Helen's handwriting, MTC, file 16, no. 206.

historical theory of separate spheres would allow.²⁵¹ They were able to negotiate separate spheres through their privileged social backgrounds: only one member of the London School Board was working-class and he was male (Benjamin Lucraft). This chapter has shown how women worked together to resist patriarchy; but it has also evidenced how some men fought alongside these feminists for sexual equality and how not all the women of the Board showed gender solidarity. Helen's political agenda has also been evidenced: she was no maverick. She wished to keep alive the liberalism of her mother and step-father but she also embraced the socialism of the Democratic Federation, which will be explored in a later chapter.

The years 1876-1885 saw Helen become one of the most popular and well known members of the Board, idolised by her working-class electorate, as when they cheered her from the court after her trial for libel, but disliked by the Board establishment as she worked to improve the lives of her constituents, especially girls and women. The Liberals opposed her fiercely at every election. Hollis fails to recognise that Helen's marshalling of 'her Irish "heavies"' during elections' was not due to a belligerent ego but to the aggressive campaign of the official Liberals to unseat her in Southwark for political reasons, especially her involvement in Ireland, which will be examined in the next chapter.²⁵²

From 1879 she stood as an independent Radical Democrat, and press reports for each election record attempts to break up her meetings and unseat her from the Board. Helen wrote to Henry George after the 1882 election, relating how bitter the

²⁵¹ Vickery, 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A review of the categories and chronology of English women's history,' Morgan, Sue (ed.) *The Feminist History Reader* (Abingdon, 2006) chapter 3, p.83.

²⁵² Hollis, *Ladies Elect*, p. 100.

contest had been in Southwark. Pamphlets and bills had been distributed, attacking her politics, in an attempt to turn the voters against her:

The Liberal Association of the Borough distinctly declared that my conduct in regard to Ireland and Gladstone made it impossible for “liberals” to allow me to be re-elected.²⁵³

The electorate, overwhelmingly working-class and many of them Irish, returned her, nevertheless, on three successive occasions. Her political colleague F.W. Soutter wrote that the political hostility towards Helen during the School Board elections resulted from ‘her habit of calling a spade a spade utterly regardless as to whether the said spade’s political bent was Tory or Liberal.’²⁵⁴ She would toe no party line to win favour within an official caucus, ‘for the opinion of “society”’ as that term is generally understood she cared not a rap.’²⁵⁵ Soutter recounted how her sympathies and allegiances were always with her constituents and how her quarterly constituency meetings were packed with enthusiastic voters, amongst whom were those whom she had helped financially, for she was ‘generous in providing meals and books for the children of Southwark out of her own purse.’²⁵⁶

This negates Hollis’s claim that she was not child-centred.²⁵⁷ Helen declared that she ‘stood for the parents against the Board and she stood for the children against the parents.’²⁵⁸ After leaving the Board she continued to be contacted by teachers in London to provide support for children, negating the idea that she was disliked by

²⁵³ Helen Taylor to Henry George, 4 January 1883, HGC.

²⁵⁴ F.W. Soutter, *Fights For Freedom* (London, 1924), p. 147.

²⁵⁵ F. W. Soutter, *Recollections of a Labour Pioneer* (London, 1925), p. 84.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁷ Hollis, *Ladies Elect*, p. 97.

²⁵⁸ Helen Taylor’s speech to the Conference of School Attendance Officers, *School Board Chronicle*, 31 October 1885.

teachers.²⁵⁹ Saxon Street Board School wrote to her in 1889, thanking her for allowing the school's pupils to use her private library²⁶⁰ and that same year an infant school in Bermondsey wrote, expressing thanks 'for your kind help which has never been solicited in vain for the benefit of the children,' and asking her for a contribution to fund a tea party for its pupils.²⁶¹

Helen had successes too on the Board, if success is seen as moving debates along for those who follow to win the battle. She almost succeeded in securing free education in London's board schools before the 1891 Act, for which her campaign certainly paved the way. She helped to expose and end cruelty and corruption within the London school system and was a staunch defender of secular education.

Helen's feminism was always to the fore in her campaign for women teachers and girl pupils to have better opportunities and conditions. She believed that working-class boys and girls should have no limits set on their social advancement. Finally, in becoming the first woman to chair a committee of the London School Board, she broke down a barrier which other women could cross in future. Her chairing of the committee was declared a success by the *School Board Chronicle*, which was not usually a supporter of Helen.²⁶²

She was blunt and opinionated, traits that are often admired in male politicians.

Nevertheless, Helen had a high moral sense of what was right and wrong and she

²⁵⁹ Hollis, *Ladies Elect*, p. 97.

²⁶⁰ R.W. Postage to H. Taylor, 19 January 1889, MTC, file 16, no. 124.

²⁶¹ S.A. Long to Helen Taylor, 28 February, 1889, MTC, file 15, no. 108.

²⁶² *School Board Chronicle*, 10 October 1885.

‘fought for the people,’²⁶³ the poor of London, so that their lives might be improved through educational opportunity. For this she deserves to be reinstated in the historiography of Victorian education, both for herself as a woman of political agency but also as an example of how the creation of the London School Board allowed women to negotiate a political role for themselves, advance the feminist cause and demand equality in public life as privileged members of this influential and publicly prominent organisation, in which men and women worked politically together for the first time in an elected assembly.

²⁶³ Soutter recounts in *Recollections of a Labour Pioneer* that this is the inscription on her grave in Torquay (p. 85).

4. Helen Taylor and the Land Question in Great Britain and Ireland 1879-1907

The intention of this chapter is to reinstate Helen into the historiography of the land question in Britain and Ireland in the latter part of the nineteenth century through, firstly, an examination of her work for the Irish Land League 1881-2, followed by an assessment of her contribution to campaigns for land reform throughout Great Britain. It has been noted, earlier, how the historiography of the Victorian land movement has, whilst occasionally recognising her as an influential figure, made no full assessment of the political influence she wielded in the land reforming organisations she joined; it often totally ignores her role.

Helen's work for land reform will clearly illustrate that her mission in her public life was to carry on the work of her step-father. Mill had written and involved himself extensively in the debates on land ownership. This chapter will show, however, that Helen combined this tradition of radical liberal concern with the new Marxist socialism of the Democratic Federation, which demanded land nationalisation and Home Rule for Ireland. This chapter, accordingly, will examine how the nature of her feminism, anti-imperialist and socialist, was at variance with mainstream British feminism.

Furthermore, the influence of Helen's feminism on the campaign groups she belonged to and the people within them will be explored, showing that sexual equality was central to her politics and that she never lost an opportunity to campaign for the advancement of her sex. Again it will be seen how her privileged social position enabled her to influence policy and play a central role in reform

groups, despite being disadvantaged by her sex. Thereby it will illustrate how she was able to negotiate separate spheres and examine how the discourses within the land reform movement were gendered. At times women's involvement faced open hostility from society and from within sections of the land movement. Women such as Helen had to stand up against such opposition. Yet some men in the land movement were openly supportive of Helen's feminism and influenced by it and were themselves supporters of women's rights.

Finally this chapter will demonstrate, as was seen in her School Board work, that Helen sometimes used the ideology of separate spheres, with its narrowly defined role of women as domestic guardians of the family, to argue that the land question was a woman question. The land question affected family life and was a question of morality, both aspects being firmly within the accepted women's sphere of influence. Thus at times Helen involved women in the discourse on land by conforming to a gendered view of women's innate character which gave legitimacy to the political agency she wielded and asked other women to wield on behalf of their families.

In order to locate Helen within the radical tradition of concern over land ownership it is necessary to give some attention to the history of the land question in Britain and the exact discourse within which Victorian reformers were located. That the land had been stolen from the people was a long held belief in progressive circles. In 1649 landless men, known as the Diggers, had moved onto land at St George's Hill in Surrey and other sites in the south, with the idea of forming communities, and had been dispersed by the army. Their leader, Gerrard Winstanley, wrote that property is

an original sin and that the land had been stolen by the Normans, a belief that would be held by reformers for the next three hundred years.¹

By the early nineteenth century, the Chartists' land plan, formulated by Fergus O'Connor, had the support of 70,000 members, each paying a subscription to enter a ballot to win a landholding; Chartism was the largest back-to-the-land movement of the nineteenth century.² As Chartism waned, utopian socialists, the Owenites, took up the land cause, forming self-sufficient communities.³ One of their adherents, James Hill, formed a similar land scheme to the Chartists'. This obtained the approval of John Stuart Mill but failed through lack of funds.⁴ Mill, himself, represented 'a deviant tradition in nineteenth century liberalism'⁵ in that he believed that land could not be regarded as the same as other forms of private property because it was finite and not man-made. Such beliefs were still liberal rather than socialist, as the idea of entitlement to land did not embrace collective ownership or interfere with the individual benefiting from the improvements made on the land, over which the state had no claim.

Mill had written on land in his 'Principles of Political Economy' and his pamphlet, 'England and Ireland'. He drew on the centuries old tradition that land belongs to the whole of society and that private ownership of this finite resource is immoral. Mill was a leading member of the Land Reform Association, which regarded land

¹ Alan Howkins, 'From Diggers to Dongas, the Land in English Radicalism,' *History Workshop Journal* vol. 54 (2002), pp. 1-23, p. 3.

² *Ibid.* p. 9.

³ See Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁵ Ursula Vogel, 'The Land Question: A Liberal Theory of Communal Property,' *History Workshop Journal* vol. 27 (1989), pp. 106-135, p. 106.

ownership as necessitating Government intervention.⁶ The Association called for a tax on rent, tenant rights, protection of common lands against enclosure and state purchase of land for use as agricultural cooperatives, thereby attacking the privileges of the landowners. In his writings Mill, drawing on Ricardo's law on rent, outlined society's stake in the rent taken by landlords, which gave the latter an unearned (and thereby an immoral) income. Mill thus maintained that contemporary land laws were immoral, leading to private landlords obtaining great wealth because land scarcity pushed up land values, especially in the growing Victorian cities.

In 'England and Ireland' Mill recommended a peasant proprietary as a way of solving unrest and of maintaining the Union between the two countries, which he fully supported, believing English civilisation to be a force for good in the world. It has been noted that Mill was the first to set the Irish land question within the discipline of political economy, taking into account aspects of Irish society and acknowledging the moral worth of native custom.⁷ Mill advocated 'fixed rents and perpetuity of interest for the tenant and the removal of competition as the determinant of rent.'⁸ As a result of his pamphlet (1868) it has been claimed that he 'prepared English liberal opinion for land reform in Ireland.'⁹ He attacked rack renting, especially in Ireland, and the profits made by landowners from the labour of their tenants. His solution was a special land tax, which would acknowledge society's stake in the land against future rents, but he believed that landlords should be compensated.

⁶ I am indebted for the following summary of Mill's position on the land question to Vogel's article.

⁷ Philip Bull, *Land, Politics and Nationalism: A Study of the Irish Land Question* (London, 1996), p. 30.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

The Land Tenure Reform League, created by John Stuart Mill and Alfred Russel Wallace in 1871, did not survive the former's death in 1873.¹⁰ The land reform movement declined during the 1870s and historians have put this down to rising economic prosperity.¹¹ This boom was short-lived and a series of bad harvests in the late 1870s led to an agricultural recession and the fear of another famine in Ireland which put land reform back into the centre of radical concerns.

J. E. Thorold Rogers has been credited with playing a pivotal role in this upsurge of interest in the land. He had been a member of Mill's Land Tenure Reform League¹² and, therefore, within Helen Taylor's social circle. An economic historian, he was an influence on Henry George. Rogers' writings and speeches popularised the theories of the radical William Cobden, who had died in 1865.¹³ He popularised Cobden's last speech before his death and made him into what has been referred to as a 'a totem of the land movement.'¹⁴ Rogers recalled the speech at the meeting in 1869 that inaugurated the Land Tenure Reform League and he wrote the books 'Cobden and Modern Political Opinion' (1875) and 'Six Centuries of Work and Wages' (1884), which became required reading for land reformers. In doing so he gave impetus to the land movement.¹⁵ Rogers agreed with Cobden that the 'Norman yoke' analysis of the land problem was incorrect and rather it was following the Reformation that the land had been stolen from the people, a theme which will be

¹⁰ See Joseph Edwards, *Land and real tariff Reform; being The Land Reformers' Handbook for 1909* (London, 1909).

¹¹ See Paul Bew, *Land and the National Question in Ireland* (London, 1978), Barbara Solow, *The Land Question and the Irish Economy* (Harvard, 1971) and Roy Douglas, *Land, People and Politics*, (London, 1976).

¹² Douglas, *Land, People and Politics*, p. 18.

¹³ For the following account on the importance of Rogers I am indebted to Philip Bull, *Irish Land and Politics*, in Matthew Cragoe. & Paul Readman (eds.), *The Land Question in Britain 1750 – 1950* (Basingstoke, 2010), chapter 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

seen to be a part of Helen's lectures on land. This had followed the unsuccessful rebellion of the peasants under Kett in 1549.¹⁶

The leading thinker and influence on land reform throughout the 1880s was the American political economist, Henry George. His writings and lecture tours were to revitalise the land question in Britain. He had a huge impact on British and Irish land reforming groups and experienced public fame and adoration from reformers and the working class, becoming one of the most famous and influential men of his time. First published in Great Britain in 1880, his 'Progress and Poverty' was republished in numerous cheap editions which made it available for mass readership. Indeed it has been claimed that 'Henry George, not Karl Marx, was the true catalyst of Britain's insurgent proletariat.'¹⁷ His writings, which included an influential pamphlet on the Irish land problem ('The Irish Land Question'), became the bibles of the land reform movement. He asked the question, which added an urban aspect to the land movement: Why do advanced industrial nations see an increase in poverty? He found the answer in the laws relating to land ownership and the land speculation which comes with industrialisation, which he had witnessed first-hand when he lived in California. At first the land there was cheap and available to all but, as towns grew and land became scarce, speculators moved in and land became expensive and unobtainable by ordinary working people. His answer was a tax on the unimproved value of the land, which became known (and over-simplified) as 'the single tax,' with no compensation for landlords, as land morally belonged to the people. This tax would replace all other taxes.¹⁸

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

¹⁷ E.P. Lawrence, *Henry George in the British Isles* (Michigan, 1957), p. 3.

¹⁸ Henry George, *Progress and Poverty* (reprinted New York, 2006), p.242.

George argued that economic rent was determined not by the labour of individuals but through social value, which resulted from social advances of society in 'knowledge and technical skills.'¹⁹ Together with population growth, this progress in society led to a greater demand for land, which increased the price of this finite commodity. Unlike the working class and the capitalists, all the money received through rent by the landlords George regarded as unearned, absorbing 'the *whole* disposable surplus created by the co-operative efforts of society.'²⁰ Landlords were thus the leeches of society and their unearned income was the result of their monopoly of a scarce resource needed in industrial nations by both capitalists and labour. George was not a socialist, despite his quasi-socialist language, and remained a 'liberal theorist.' Although he sometimes talked of his tax proposal as nationalisation of the land, George was not a land nationaliser; he believed rather that both schemes would have the same outcome.

Helen was, therefore, steeped in radical concerns for land which had a long history. She had spoken at demonstrations of agricultural workers in England called to protest against their reduced wages before she became a member of the leading reform groups.²¹ Land had been one of a number of political concerns exercising the radical mind throughout the century, but it would be the Land War in Ireland of 1878 to 1882 which would put the land question at the top of the political agenda throughout Great Britain and Ireland. Not until the First World War would interest in land reform wane and slip from political prominence.

¹⁹ This analysis of George's theory is indebted to Vogel, 'The Land Question: A Liberal Theory of Communal Property,' p. 122.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Irish Times*, 23 November, 1878.

Ireland and the Land League Question 1881-1882

Helen's involvement in the Land War in Ireland thus arose out of her political and intellectual background and her long collaboration with Mill. It was very much a natural development which led to her radical interest in land. She was already campaigning in the burgeoning British land movement, to be discussed later in this chapter, and a member of the newly formed Democratic Federation, its leading manifesto commitments being reorganisation of land ownership and Home Rule for Ireland.²²

In Ireland land reform had been linked with nationalism by James Fintan Lalor, who had supported the nationalist Young Ireland movement in the 1840s. His writings on land were influenced by the speeches and writings of his fellow Irish agrarian reformer, William Conner.²³ They disagreed, in that Lalor did not believe the present system of landlordism could be reformed to protect tenant rights. The Fenian, Michael Davitt, had read Lalor whilst imprisoned for treason in Dartmoor prison and on his release became determined to improve the position of the Irish peasant.

The latter lived a precarious existence at the mercy of Anglo-Irish landlords from whom they rented their small plots. They faced ever-increasing rents, starvation, eviction and emigration. Davitt himself had suffered eviction as a child from his home in Mayo and had been brought up in a Lancashire mill town. He formed the Land League in 1879 as a means of ending the abuses of English landlords in Ireland. The League intended to win secure tenancies at fair rents for the peasants;

²² See chapter 5 for her involvement in the Democratic Federation.

²³ I am indebted for the following information to Bull, *Land, Politics and Nationalism: A Study of the Irish Land Question*, (London, 1996).

in short it saw the need for peasant ownership of the land, though some like Davitt and Helen Taylor went further and believed the land should be nationalised.

The League organised a rent strike in 1881 and physically opposed the ensuing evictions of peasants from their hovels and land. Families who took over the land of evicted tenants faced social exclusion or ‘boycotting’, as it became known after the treatment meted out to an Irish land agent, Captain Boycott. Boycott had been ostracised by his neighbours, who refused to gather the harvest on the land he administered for an English landlord, Lord Erne. This social unrest was known as the Land War and had begun in 1879 after a number of bad harvest years had made Davitt fear that another Irish Famine was imminent and action was needed to avert it. The crisis led to what was termed the New Departure, an alliance between two sections of Irish nationalism under the umbrella of the Land League, the physical force Fenians (among them Davitt and John Devoy’s Clan na Gael in America) and the constitutional Irish Nationalist Party led by Parnell. Thus ‘land had become a metaphor for nationalism.’²⁴

In 1881 the British Government imprisoned the leaders of the League, expecting this to end the agitation, and later Gladstone’s Government declared the organisation illegal. Coercion laws had been passed and land leaguers arrested and held without trial. Helen became involved in protests against the Coercion Acts. In February 1881 she presided over a public meeting at Bermondsey which was attended by the Irish nationalist MPs, Mr T. P. O’Connor and Mr O’Connor Power. This was one of more than twenty such meetings held that month in the capital organised by the

²⁴ Bull, *Land, Politics and Nationalism*, p. 93.

Anti-Coercion Association.²⁵ Helen was one of the Vice Presidents of this organisation which, in November 1880, had sent an address to Gladstone and Forster, the Chief Secretary of Ireland, declaring that:

It is the duty of English and Scotch radicals to help the struggling people of Ireland, because the present terrible and critical position of that country is mainly due to the action of Englishmen and Scotchmen in the past.²⁶

The address declared its support for the Land League and maintained that agrarian crime was caused by ‘the terrible distress of the last few years, and in the use of that distress by the landlords to exercise their powers without mercy.’²⁷

The next chapter will show how the Democratic Federation was in part formed as a result of opposition to the suspension of habeas corpus in Ireland. Davitt, however, had foreseen that leading land leaguers would be imprisoned under the new legislation and had created a Ladies’ Land League, modelled on the philanthropic American Ladies’ Land League, to carry on the work of supporting the rent strike and opposing evictions. Helen joined this organisation immediately it was created in February 1881.²⁸ This action set her firmly against Gladstone and the British Liberal Government, since the Irish Ladies’ Land League would not confine itself to charitable work but would encourage its women members to be politically active and take the place of the imprisoned men at meetings and at evictions of peasants for non-payment of rent.

²⁵ *The Times*, 2 February 1881 and 5 February 1881.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 13 November 1880.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 13 November 1880.

²⁸ See Michael Davitt, *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland* (London, 1904) for a full account of the Land War and the formation of the Land League and the Ladies’ Land League. Also Anna Parnell, *The Tale of a Great Sham* (Dublin 1986).

Helen Taylor's Anti-imperialist Feminism in the Ladies' Land League

An examination of Helen's political activism in the Ladies' Land League from 1881 to 1882 reveals how she fought imperialism in Ireland on behalf of this Irish nationalist organisation, which saw the Land War it was involved in as part of the fight against British rule. The nature of the feminism of the Ladies' Land League will be assessed together with the challenge it mounted to separate spheres and to the British Empire itself.

In March 1881 the British women's suffragist Priscilla McLaren wrote to Helen, warning her that many in the women's rights movement feared she was bringing the cause of women's suffrage into disrepute through her political activism in joining the Irish Land League. Priscilla wrote a sympathetic letter, lamenting that British feminists could not tolerate all strands of opinion, but warning her:

I hear now and then darker surmises of how much you and some others will retard our suffrage movement by signing yourselves up with the Land League question.²⁹

Priscilla was voicing the gulf between the anti-imperialist feminism of Helen and the Protestant philanthropic feminism of many within the British suffrage movement. The latter based their claims for equality in terms of support for British imperialism and the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race. Chapter 2 briefly illustrated the tensions that had existed between Helen and the women's movement at the time of Mill's support for women's suffrage during the 1867 suffrage debates in Parliament. Thus there were those in the movement who already had their

²⁹ Priscilla McLaren to Helen Taylor, 15 March 1881, MTC, File 13, no. 234.

differences with Helen, even before she chose a political path which outraged many in British society, that of supporting Home Rule for the Irish.

The British women's movement looked on with horror at Helen's physical and intellectual involvement in Irish politics and feared she would damage the demands for women's suffrage through her actions. Indeed, there were certainly those who pointed to women's involvement in the Irish Land War as proof of women's inherent unsuitability to have the vote. For example, F.M. Holmes, a writer of popular contemporary biographies which extolled the successes and virtues of the British Empire under such titles as *Four Heroes of India*, was one of those who linked women's political agency in Ireland during the Land War with their unsuitability for being granted the vote. He wrote:

If the political action of the Ladies' League is to be in any sense, a sample of what we shall get when female suffrage opens the door of political warfare to ladies, may Heaven long delay the fearful period.³⁰

So what was it about the Ladies' Land League which was incompatible with the mainstream British women's suffrage movement and which caused many to oppose Helen's involvement? Margaret Ward has examined the imperial feminism of the British suffragist movement through an examination of accounts of the Land War in the *English Women's Review*.³¹ The *Review* ignored the political agency and feminist potential of the Ladies' Land League in administering Land League funds, speaking at meetings and opposing evictions. It rather devoted its accounts of the Land War to articles praising plucky Anglo-Irish women landlords who stood up against Land League intimidation and, thereby, maintained the Anglo-Irish

³⁰ F.M. Holmes, *History of the Irish Land League, Impartially Reviewed*, (pamphlet, Great Britain, 1881), p. 122.

³¹ Margaret Ward, 'Gendering the Union: Imperial Feminism and the Ladies' Land League,' *Women's History Review* (Abingdon, 2001), 10, (1), pp. 71 – 92.

dominance of social and political life in Ireland. These ‘courageous ladies’ who were upholding British law were denied the vote, the periodical lamented, whilst male lawless Irish tenants had obtained it. Whilst Helen and Irish women were physically erecting huts to house evicted tenants the *Review* focused on relief efforts for ‘Irish Ladies in distress’ who found themselves in financial trouble due to the Irish peasants withholding rent.

The feminism which Helen met with in the Ladies’ Land League was of an entirely different nature. The leading female activists in the Ladies’ Land League, whilst feminists, were also active and passionate Irish nationalists. Therefore the Ladies were outside the British mainstream pro-Empire feminism which saw Irish demands for an Irish Parliament as a threat to the integrity and strength of the British Empire. Some English feminists like Millicent Fawcett and her daughter Phillipa would later leave the Liberal Party and join the Liberal Unionists when the Liberals adopted Home Rule for Ireland as a policy after 1885. Helen, however, believed that the Irish were equal to the Anglo-Saxons at a time when it was taken for granted in British society that the Roman Catholic Irish Celts were an inferior race. This attitude was succinctly put by a biographer of Gladstone who commented:

The Union was sacrosanct to establishment opinion in Britain, but the instinctive reaction of such opinion was to treat talking to and being influenced by the indigenous Irish as almost the equivalent of ‘nigger loving.’³²

Margaret Ward has examined how nineteenth-century feminism in Ireland ‘was shaped by class, religion and racial identification’ with Anna Parnell as the example.³³ Ward illustrates how, as a political activist, Anna insisted that women should develop their own methods of organisation, which would change their lives

³² Roy Jenkins, *Gladstone* (London, 1995), p. 319.

³³ Ward, ‘Gendering the Union: Imperial Feminism and the Ladies’ Land League,’ p. 71.

and give them agency. Ward demonstrates how Anna was influenced by her knowledge of American feminism, gained both through her reading and her contact with her great-aunt, who was on the executive of the American Women's Suffrage Association. By studying Anna Parnell, Ward reveals the complicated relationship between feminism, unionism and nationalism and concludes that Irish feminism developed separately from British feminism, the latter being imperial in nature and thus opposed to Irish nationalism.³⁴ Irish feminism, therefore, changed through a process beginning with Anna, Ward claims, from a link 'with Unionism to one which incorporated Nationalist aspirations,' thereby undermining colonial power.³⁵ This was the feminism which Helen became part of in the Land League and she was almost certainly at ease and agreement with this Irish nationalist feminism. She maintained her friendship with Anna after the campaign was over.³⁶

Anna, President of the Ladies' Land League, was the sister of Charles Stewart Parnell, who was the leader of both the Land League and the Irish National Party in the House of Commons. Her feminism was fiercely anti-British and anti-imperialistic. She coined the term 'the famine queen' for Queen Victoria³⁷ and wrote anti-imperial poetry against the British Empire, mocking its supposed civilising qualities:

³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 75.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

³⁶ There are letters between them spanning a decade in MTC, file 18.

³⁷ Schneller, Beverley (ed.), *Anna Parnell's Political Journalism: Contents and Texts* (Dublin, 2005), p.244. Schneller writes that Anna wrote objecting to the visit of Queen Victoria to Ireland in 1900 using the term. Maud Gonne copied Anna's phrase 'the famine Queen' to headline her editorial on the visit in the *United Irishman* on 7 April 1900.

Oppression foul – starvation –
We'll do our best to spread
Till each remotest nation
Messiah's name shall dread.³⁸

The hegemony of the women's suffrage movement saw the English race as the most advanced on earth; but here was Helen, one of their own, and a well-known public speaker and political activist, a member of the London School Board to boot, supporting a feminism which, many feared, would undermine the British Empire, the great civilising world force. Like Helen, Anna was a loner within her own society. She was never at ease among the Anglo-Irish landowners of her native Wicklow. The Parnells stood apart, with an American mother whose father had fought in the American War of Independence against the British crown and whose maternal aunt was involved in the American women's suffrage movement and an Anglo-Irish father whose family had a tradition of Anglo-Irish nationalism. An example of this complexity is that Anna's American relatives took part in the Civil War on the Union side when many Anglo-Irish supported the Confederacy.³⁹ 'It was a short step to recognising a bond between enslaved blacks and the subservient and powerless Irish peasantry' wrote her biographer.⁴⁰

Her family's Anglo-Irish nationalism was a great political influence on the young Anna. Her great-grandfather had voted against the union of Great Britain and Ireland in 1801 and her grandfather had supported Catholic emancipation.⁴¹ By the time she grew up she had become an ardent Irish nationalist with a hatred of the British in Ireland, sympathetic to and attending the trial of the Fenians in Dublin in

³⁸ Coté, *Fanny and Anna Parnell: Ireland's Patriot Sisters* (London, 1991), p. 34, quoting from Anna Parnell, *Tales Old and New*.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

the 1860s, writing anti-British articles for American nationalist papers. Anna worked closely in New York with the militant wing of Irish nationalism, Clan na Gael, in raising funds for the relief of Irish tenants in the late seventies. This nationalism, shared with two of her siblings, Fanny and Charles, set them at odds with their Anglo-Irish social circle, who Anna found exceedingly intellectually dull and narrow-minded and they in turn found her an unsuitable friend for their daughters.⁴² Meanwhile, Helen's anti-imperialism is seen in her membership of the Democratic Federation, which will be examined in the next chapter. Indeed, it has been claimed that land reform was the only movement which could have enabled a 'mass audience for socialism in the eighties.'⁴³ Both women believed in a secular state and both were working in their political lives for a republic.⁴⁴ Helen supported the inclusion of a demand for a British Republic in the Constitution of the Democratic Federation⁴⁵ and she had been elected to the London School Board on a platform which included secular schooling. Anna, herself, was pilloried in the press and by the Roman Catholic Church for questioning the existence of God at a Land League meeting.

Helen's involvement with the League brought her into contact with the anti-imperialism of Irish America. This would have appalled her contemporary British feminists. Helen was in contact with Patrick and Ellen Ford.⁴⁶ Patrick was the editor

⁴² I am indebted to Coté's *Fanny and Anna Parnell* and Roy Foster's *Charles Stewart Parnell: the man and his family* (Sussex, 1976) for the background to Anna's early life. For an in-depth look at the development of Anna's feminism and nationalism see both Coté and Foster. Also Anna's own writings: *The Tale of a Great Sham* and her political journalism reprinted in Beverly E. Schneller, *Anna Parnell's Political Journalism* (Bethesda, 2005).

⁴³ Willard Wolfe, *From Radicalism to Socialism: men and ideas in the formation of Fabian Socialist doctrines, 1881 – 1889*, (Yale, 1975), p.49.

⁴⁴ As evidenced in chapter 5. Also Coté, *Fanny and Anna Parnell*.

⁴⁵ See chapter 5.

⁴⁶ Henry George to Patrick Ford 23 September, 1882. Helen sent her regards to the Fords who had received letters from her. HGGC.

of the anti-British American newspaper, the *Irish World*, which the British banned during the Land War. Helen corresponded with Ford and his wife on the possibility of helping them to arrange to have the paper published in London, though this does not appear to have been successful. Helen's activism was driving her further and further away from the philanthropic feminism of Victorian Britain. Ford was a supporter of the 'physical force' Irish nationalist movement in America, Clan na Gael, and believed that the overthrow of British Government in Ireland would benefit anti-imperial movements throughout the whole world, precisely what British unionists feared.⁴⁷ The future of the British Empire was at stake in the struggle taking place in Ireland and Helen, throwing her lot in with Anna Parnell and her backers in America, Clan na Gael, had, in the opinion of mainstream British feminism, chosen the wrong side.

There would have been no doubt in Helen's mind that in joining the Ladies' Land League she was joining a fight for national self-determination. Anna's brother, Charles Stewart Parnell, had linked the Land War and the struggle for Irish freedom two years previously. At a meeting in Cork on 22 March 1880 he had declared, 'If we succeed in emigrating the Irish landlords the English government will soon have to follow them.'⁴⁸ The leaders of the Ladies' Land League came mainly from politically active nationalist families, including the novelist Hannah Lynch, Kate Rae and a future senator in the Irish Free State, Jennie Wyse Power, in whose house the Proclamation of an Irish Republic would be signed in 1916. These were the feminists Helen was now consorting with to the dismay of the suffragists back home. The 'darker surmises' Priscilla McLaren warned Helen about was sheer

⁴⁷James P. Rodechko, *Patrick Ford and the Search for America: A Case Study of Irish American Journalism* (New York, 1967), p. 190.

⁴⁸ *Cork Examiner*, 28 March 1880.

British understatement. Radical anti-imperialists like Helen linked imperialism with a negation of true English values of liberty and English moral worth, views which they often combined with anti-militarism.⁴⁹ Anti-imperialists opposed both the British occupation of Egypt in 1882 and the Coercion Acts in Ireland as immoral and a threat to democracy and therefore against true Liberal English values. Helen's new political ally, Anna Parnell, became such a hated figure in England for her anti-British pronouncements that her effigy was burnt on Bonfire Night, at the height of the Land War, by the villagers of Eltham near London.⁵⁰ Eltham would have been chosen as an appropriate place to burn the effigy of a Parnell because it became the home of Charles Stewart Parnell when he moved in to live there with his lover, Katharine O'Shea. Andrew Kettle, a secretary of the Land League, later recalled the political ideology behind Anna's running of the Ladies' Land League:

I found she had a better knowledge of the lights and shades of Irish peasant life, of the real economic conditions of the country, and of the social and political forces which had to be acted upon to work out the freedom of Ireland than any person, man or woman I have ever met... Anna Parnell would have worked the Land League revolution to a much better conclusion than her great brother.⁵¹

That Helen was in agreement with this intent is seen in the assessment of her by Anna who, speaking to Irish electors in Camberwell in 1885, lauded Helen as 'the only English person I have ever met who looked on the Irish question entirely from the Irish point of view.'⁵²

⁴⁹ Mira Matikkala, *Empire and Imperial Ambition: Liberty, Englishness and Anti-imperialism in late Victorian Britain* (London, 2011).

⁵⁰ Katherine O'Shea, *Charles Stewart Parnell*, vol. 1, (London, 1914), p. 56.

⁵¹ A.J. Kettle & L.J. Kettle, *The Material for Victory: being the memoirs of Andrew J Kettle* (Dublin, 1958), p. 48.

⁵² Anna Parnell to Helen Taylor, 18 November 1885, MTC, file 18, no. 82.

The political collaboration of Helen and Anna involved more than land and Irish legislative independence, for it had at its core the feminism of both women. Anna linked the Land War with the struggle for women's rights:

They [*i.e. the landlords' female relatives*] were, in fact, only a little less the victims of the landlords than the tenants themselves; while on the other hand they were entirely helpless, instead of being, as the tenants were, only partially helpless against the landlords. If the Irish landlords had not deserved extermination for anything else, they would have deserved it for the treatment of their own women.⁵³

Hannah Lynch, another leading lady land leaguer and novelist, wrote of 'Ireland – the very wretchedness land on earth for women, the one spot on the globe where no provision is made for her.'⁵⁴ That Helen and Anna discussed their feminism and the failings of the British women's suffrage movement is documented. In 1907, shortly after Helen's death, Anna wrote to the *Irish Times* in response to Countess Markievicz's attack on modern day women suffragettes as 'undignified' and 'ridiculous':

The old fashioned women's rights women were ridiculed just as much as the new, until they took to working for their political enemies, just as our own Irish members do, and they exchanged being ridiculed for being really ridiculous. The late Helen Taylor told me that she had known the female suffragists, with whom she herself had ceased to have any connection, insist on giving their support to a Gladstonian M P who had voted against female franchise instead of to a conservative who had voted for it.⁵⁵

How Anna and Helen's feminism differed from that of the women of the *English Women's Review* is seen in the reaction of this journal to the imprisonment of their campaigning sisters in Ireland, whom the British government started to arrest late in 1881 for their physical opposition to evictions and their incitement of peasants to resist the loss of their homes. The January 1882 edition reported these arrests,

⁵³ Anna Parnell, *The Tale of a Great Sham*, p. 86.

⁵⁴ Hannah Lynch, *Autobiography of a Child* (London, 1889), p. 217.

⁵⁵ *Irish Times*, 7 December 1907.

agreeing that ‘irresponsible women’ should be dealt with in this way and having no sympathy with the cause and the political agency they were showing. Secure in its imperial feminism, the review continued, ‘if women are capable of judging between political right and wrong, women are capable of giving a vote in support of their principles.’ And ‘if women are liable to the same consequences for illegal acts as their husbands and brothers, they should have the same legal power to prevent those acts.’ Sympathy was saved for a brave Anglo-Irish lady in Cork who had defended herself against intimidation from the land leaguers ‘and yet this brave old lady is denied the vote which “Rory of the Hills” [a Land League agitator] is competent to exercise.’ In November 1881, the *English Women’s Review* reported the reading of a paper by Anglo-Irish Unionist Isabella Todd on ‘The place of women in the administration of the Irish poor law’ completely ignoring the Irish feminists who were attempting to change the political regime in Ireland through direct action at evictions and meetings.⁵⁶ Such philanthropic feminism, as being advocated by Todd, would have been anathema to Helen’s political beliefs as a socialist and member of the Democratic Federation.

The challenge to separate spheres

The Ladies’ Land League was formed on 4 February 1881.⁵⁷ The committee of the new organisation, headed by Anna Parnell, issued a plea to Irishwomen in a letter to the newspapers to join the new organisation and form branches. In addition to fundraising, women were instructed to take direct political action and ‘... to give information of evictions in your district, to give advice and encouragement to the

⁵⁶ *English Woman’s Review*, November 1881.

⁵⁷ Jenny Wyse Power writing in *Sinn Féin Weekly*, 9 October 1909.

unhappy victims and to administer the funds as necessary.’⁵⁸ So Anna Parnell gave the League a feminist agenda by calling on women to demonstrate political agency through physically opposing land evictions and ignoring the ideology of separate spheres. From its inception, therefore, Anna saw the Ladies’ Land League as a vehicle for women’s social action and Helen was involved from the outset.

The Nation of the 26th February 1881 reported the inaugural meeting of the London branch of the Ladies’ Land League with Helen on the committee, Hannah Lynch as Honorary Secretary and Mrs A.M. Sullivan, the wife of an Irish nationalist MP, as President. Only a month later Anna and Helen were together at a meeting of the London Branch calling for action in fund raising for the movement. At this meeting Anna blamed the Royal Ulster Constabulary for mutilating cattle in Ireland and pinning the blame for such atrocities on the land leaguers.⁵⁹ Herbert Gladstone MP, son of William Gladstone, belittled Anna and her ladies in his diary as ‘that insane cat Anna and her silly crew.’⁶⁰

The Ladies’ Land League scandalised polite society as an affront to the ideology of separate spheres. Helen, as seen above in her School Board work, did not care about her reputation in society, so would have not been concerned when, shortly after its formation, the Ladies’ Land League was denounced by the Bishop of Dublin. Archbishop McCabe issued a pastoral letter in March 1881, which was read out in all the churches of the Dublin diocese and in which he called on women to remember that ‘their place was in the home.’⁶¹ He warned them against joining the

⁵⁸ *Freeman’s Journal*, 5 February 1881.

⁵⁹ *The Nation*, 19 March 1881.

⁶⁰ Herbert Gladstone’s ‘Diary’ in *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. 17, p. 533.

⁶¹ Coté, *Fanny and Anna Parnell*, p. 169.

women's organisation: 'Do not tolerate in your sodalities the woman who so far disavows her birth right of modesty as to parade herself before the public gaze.'⁶²

Opposition to such agency by women came from within the Irish nationalist movement as well as without. Anna had resisted attempts by some male land leaguers to make the organisation merely a philanthropic one for raising and administering funds. From its inception there were those nationalists who opposed the formation of the Ladies' Land League and were hostile to the idea of women taking part in the political struggle in Ireland. Davitt had faced hostility when he had suggested that such an organisation be formed. These opponents had included Charles Parnell, John Dillon and Thomas Brennan. Brennan had 'feared we would invite public ridicule in appearing to put women forward in places of danger.'⁶³ Davitt explained his rationale for the ladies' organisation. It would continue the fight against Irish landlordism, through supporting evicted tenants by administering and raising funds, when the male executive of the League were imprisoned.

The organisation Helen joined was to be much more than this. For Anna's Ladies' Land League did not confine itself to charitable concerns like its sister organisation in America. Although prison visiting and providing meals, money and support for the imprisoned Land Leaguers and their families was an important aspect of their work, Anna attempted to develop a revolutionary, politically active organisation which would build the support that would drive the English out of Ireland. At its creation Anna had opposed John Dillon's attempt to make the Ladies a charitable

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 170.

⁶³ Davitt, *The Fall of Feudalism*, p. 299.

organisation in the mould of the Vincent de Paul Society.⁶⁴ To understand Helen's contribution it is crucial to recognise that Anna Parnell was no philanthropic Victorian lady but a political thinker who believed the League could win Ireland's independence. To the end of her life she maintained that this potential had been thwarted by the 'weakness of character'⁶⁵ of the Irish themselves and in particular the male land leaguers and their sham of a campaign. Helen joined an organisation which was defying the separate spheres ideology of the men within it as well as in society at large. The men and women in the Land League were often at loggerheads and this is revealed in Anna's account of the Land War, *The Tale of a Great Sham*, in which she charts the gender antagonisms within the Land League. It recounts the history of the Land War as a lost opportunity and exposes the male land leaguers as all rhetoric and little action. 'For the land leaguers worked just as hard for a sham as anybody could have done for a reality.'⁶⁶ The men, Anna claimed, were just paying lip service to the campaign against the English landlords. They had no organisation and called an all-out rent strike too late to be effective. She charts the widening gulf between the men and women in the League as the ladies realised that the men were just going through the motions of a rent strike. This led her to the conclusion that:

People with aims so radically different and incompatible as the Land League and the Ladies' Land League had no business in the same boat.⁶⁷

Charles Parnell disliked the women's organisation and its revolutionary ways, for he remained a constitutionalist and accused them of being profligate with Land League funds. Parnell's capitulation was known in America as 'the sale of the Land League'

⁶⁴ Jenny Wyse Power, 'My Recollections of Anna Parnell,' *Dublin Metropolitan Magazine* (Dublin, Spring 1935), p. 16.

⁶⁵ A. Parnell, *The Tale of a Great Sham* (written in 1907), p. 174.

⁶⁶ Parnell, *The Tale of a Great Sham* p.150.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p.96.

and Anna Parnell was so incensed at the end of the Land War which would, she believed, if it had continued, have ended British rule in Ireland, that she never spoke to her brother again. She believed, as did the Irish-American backers of the Land League, Clan na Gael, that he had sold out in making peace with the British at the very point when the British had lost control in Ireland:

As rulers are those who rule, they became from that moment⁶⁸ a government *de facto*. Had they only continued as they began, perhaps now there might be only one government in Ireland and that one not English.⁶⁹

The ladies had, thus, fought opposition from within and without the nationalist movement to achieve their political contribution to the Land War. Such agency by Irish nationalist women and their sympathisers would not be seen again until 1900 and the creation of Inghinidhe na hEireann by Maud Gonne. After the Land War nationalist men excluded women from the membership of their organisations and the Ladies' Land League disappeared from the historiography. Their disappearance from the historical narrative must surely have been facilitated by this lack of opportunity for nationalist women to be politically active, in much the same way as Joan Scott believes politically active women disappeared from the historical narrative of the French Revolution:

It may be that these women's activities were lost to view because of subsequent developments which ended their participation in politics.⁷⁰

Helen's political agency within the Ladies' Land League

In June 1881 Helen crossed to Ireland as part of a delegation of the Democratic Federation with the intention of attending a Land League meeting in Dublin and

⁶⁸ Of their successful intervention in avoiding famine in 1879.

⁶⁹ A. Parnell, *The Tale of a Great Sham*, p. 57.

⁷⁰ Joan Scott, 'The Problem of Invisibility', in S.J. Kleinberg (ed.), *Retrieving Women's History* (London 1988), p. 6.

visiting the scene of evictions.⁷¹ A report was commissioned from this delegation by the Federation. This was written by Jessie Craigen and published later that summer. Before leaving England Helen attended a meeting of the Ladies' London branch held in Kensington at which she shared a platform with Charles Stewart Parnell. There she proposed a resolution condemning the continuing evictions in Ireland. She laid the blame firmly on the Government's passing of the Coercion Acts, 'by placing the forces of the crown at the disposal of the landlords, they have made such evictions possible.'⁷² The socialist and fellow campaigner F.W. Soutter remembered Helen as 'the first Englishwoman who volunteered to visit Ireland during those dark and troublesome days when the Land League agitation was at its height.'⁷³ Back home in early July she attended the Southwark Branch of the Ladies' Land League and thanks were expressed to her 'for her noble and constant advocacy of the cause of the Irish people.'⁷⁴ Also that month the Democratic Federation reported back on their trip to Ireland at a meeting of the North London Branch of the Land League. Helen attended, as they gave an account of the evictions they had witnessed. A resolution condemning coercion was passed.⁷⁵

On 4 August Helen presided over a public meeting in Blackfriars, again called to hear the report of the English delegates to Ireland. Interestingly, as this shows how active Helen was at that time, she was delayed by a School Board meeting.⁷⁶ Mr J. Finlay Finlayson described the poverty of the Irish tenants who were 'housed in hovels compared with which the kraals of the Hottentots and the wigwams of the

⁷¹ *Irish Times*, 24 June 1881.

⁷² *Freeman's Journal*, 23 June 1881.

⁷³ F.W. Soutter, *Recollections of a Labour Pioneer* (London, 1924), p. 40.

⁷⁴ *The Nation*, 7 July 1881.

⁷⁵ *Freeman's Journal*, 24 July 1881.

⁷⁶ *Daily News*, 5 August 1881.

American Indians were palaces.’ The delegates had witnessed a riot at Mitchelstown and a land sale in Naas, ‘at which the police were present in groups of three with loaded carbines.’ Finlayson proposed a resolution condemning coercion and calling for a ‘speedy and satisfactory remedy’ to the distress caused by landlordism in Ireland. A Mr. Saunders, seconding the motion, attacked the government for applying the wrong remedy to the problems in Ireland. Coercion laws were not the answer, as there was no anarchy, for ‘excessive rents constituted the great evil under which Ireland was suffering.’ This was echoed by Jessie Craigen, who called for the abolition of the landlords and declared the Land Bill was ‘not worth tuppence.’⁷⁷

In September, at a meeting of the Democratic Federation to ratify its constitution, a resolution was put forward objecting to the attack on Gladstone and Chamberlain in its manifesto for the Tyrone election. This was heavily defeated with only four votes in favour. In the debate Helen supported every word of the manifesto, in which Gladstone had been condemned as reactionary in his old age, arguing that his support for coercion in Ireland proved it to be so, for ‘she believed Mr Gladstone was equally ready to support democracy or despotism as it answered his purpose.’⁷⁸ This political stance would have infuriated many Liberal women’s suffrage supporters and her Liberal colleagues on the London School Board. Anna wrote to Helen at this time replying to her ‘kind note’, in which she had asked how she could help further. Anna said she could do so ‘by continuing to give us your moral support’ and adding,

...but any English person who was strong and active, who could come over and devote himself or herself to following the police, in order to see their brutality to the people, would be of great service at this moment.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 19 September 1881.

⁷⁹ Anna Parnell to Helen Taylor, 12 September 1881, MTC, file 18, no. 74.

In October the Land League was declared an illegal organisation by the government and its leaders, including Parnell, and many ordinary male members were imprisoned. Helen was informed of the arrest of Parnell in a telegram sent by Nora Lynch from the Dublin headquarters of the Ladies' League.⁸⁰ Davitt had already been in prison since March, when his parole licence had been revoked and he had been returned to prison to serve the rest of his sentence for treason, for which he had already served eight years. In all over a thousand men were imprisoned under Forster's Protection of Life and Property Act.⁸¹ The Ladies were now left to run the Land War on their own, only to find that the men's organisation had had little or no administration and the campaign was highly disorganised.⁸²

At a meeting of the Democratic Federation called to protest at the arrests Helen was reported in the press as having called Gladstone a 'dastardly recreant... who had forsaken the true policy of liberalism' for 'personal ambition and jealousy.'⁸³ Helen wrote to the editor of *The Echo* unrepentant but claiming she had not called Gladstone a 'dastardly recreant..... but I did call him a dastard and a recreant and believe that half of England would echo those words if polled.'⁸⁴ This personal attack on Gladstone led to Helen being soundly attacked in the press, one report hoping that the result of such an attack on Gladstone would be her losing her seat in the next School Board Election.⁸⁵ *The Birmingham Post* reported that detectives from Scotland Yard were believed to be watching prominent land leaguers, showing

⁸⁰ Nora Lynch to Helen Taylor, 15 October 1881, MTC, file 18, no. 72.

⁸¹ Jenny Wyse Power, 'My Recollections of Anna Parnell,' p. 15.

⁸² See A. Parnell, *The Tale of a Great Sham*, pp.89-90.

⁸³ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 17 October 1881.

⁸⁴ Draft Letter, no date, MTC, file 18, no. 17.

⁸⁵ *Birmingham Post*, 17 October 1881.

that Helen had moved a long way from the safe philanthropic Protestant feminism of the British suffrage movement.

The following months would see Helen's political activism increase in the cause of Ireland at the risk of her personal freedom. On 26 October Anna wrote to her, 'if you could come over we should all be very glad and you would do great good.'⁸⁶ A huge demonstration had been held in Hyde Park, London on 23 October, under the auspices of the National Land League of Great Britain, to protest at the arrests and coercion, which Helen had attended. Helen was by this time the President of the recently created Ladies' Land League of Great Britain, a sister organisation of the Irish and American Ladies' Land Leagues.⁸⁷

By the beginning of November Helen was back in Ireland at a meeting of the Ladies' Land League in Dublin, called to form a new society, The Political Prisoners' Aid Society, which would raise funds for the imprisoned male land leaguers and their families. Parnell had issued a call from Kilmainham jail for such a society to be created.⁸⁸ Helen was elected President of the Society and gave a speech in the moral radical tradition. The meeting took place shortly after the death of Ellen McDonagh, bayoneted by a British soldier while protesting against evictions in Belmullet, County Mayo. During her speech Helen linked the Irish struggle for land with that of past fights in Italy and France against tyranny; she went so far as to claim that the government of Britain was the most tyrannical in the world save Turkey:⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Anna Parnell to Helen Taylor, 26 October 1881, MTC, file 18, no. 75.

⁸⁷ *Morning Post*, 24 October 1881.

⁸⁸ Jenny Wyse Power, 'My Recollections of Anna Parnell,' p. 15.

⁸⁹ *Freeman's Journal*, 3 November 1881.

Every Englishman or Englishwoman who had the smallest respect for constitutional liberty which had hitherto distinguished the history of England...was morally bound to give the strongest protest against the iniquities which were now disgracing England in Ireland.⁹⁰

Helen was due to return to England the next day but she prolonged her stay in Ireland.⁹¹ On 13 November Anna was at a meeting of the Liverpool Ladies' Land League which Helen had been expected to attend. She explained that Helen had remained in Ireland to attend the inquest into the death of Ellen McDonagh, as she was 'anxious to hear the truth about this terrible case.' Anna, who had sent Helen to Belmullet as a representative of the Ladies' Land League, believed that the women giving evidence to the coroner would be protected from government forces by Helen's presence.⁹²

During this November visit to Ireland Helen was physically involved in the land league work, erecting huts, financed and supplied by the League, to shelter the evicted tenants and attending evictions. This was recalled twenty-six years later by the Irish nationalist and later senator in the Irish Free State, Jennie Wyse Power, who wrote an article on her Ladies' Land League days in 1909, cataloguing the day-to-day work of the ladies and the brutality of the police at evictions. Wyse Power recalled attending an eviction in Hacketstown on the borders of Wicklow and Carlow with Helen. All the inhabitants of an estate were being evicted for non-payment of rent and she had been sent down by the Ladies' Land League in Dublin to oversee the building of the land league huts to shelter the fifty evicted families and to encourage them to withhold the rent. On returning to her lodgings on the eve of the eviction she found 'that the ladies of Dublin had sent down Miss Helen

⁹⁰ *Irish Times*, 5 November 1881.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Liverpool Mercury*, 14 November 1881.

Taylor, a sympathetic English woman of advanced years and a Miss Cantwell of Dublin, whose age was fifteen years, to help her.'⁹³ As they were planning for the confrontation of the coming day the police entered and took their names and addresses and 'warned us against unlawful assembly.' The next day they had to dodge the police, climbing over ditches to reach the families before their evictions to give their support and keep them firm to land league ideals of withholding the rent and protecting their homes. On the second day they were in effect put under house arrest in their lodgings to stop them reaching the tenants during that day's evictions, after arms and ammunition had been stolen and hidden from the soldiers the previous day. Anna, too, was to recall this physical effort by Helen when she shared a platform with Helen during the latter's attempt to be elected as the first woman MP in 1885:

She was grateful to Miss Taylor for the action she took in the dark days of the Forster regime in Ireland. On Lord Granard's estate, where numbers of evictions were carried out, she assisted with her own hands to put up Land League huts...She would earnestly recommend the Irish electors to vote for Miss Taylor as she had given time, energy and money to the cause of Ireland.⁹⁴

In late 1881, when rumours had spread that the Ladies' Land League was also to become a proscribed organisation, the ladies had made plans in the eventuality of their arrest and imprisonment. Henry George, sent to Ireland as special correspondent for the American-Irish nationalist paper, *The Irish World*, wrote to Patrick Ford, its editor, on 10 Nov 1881:

Miss Helen Taylor came to Dublin last week to propose that she should take charge, letting Miss Parnell go to Holyhead and direct from there. Her idea was that as soon as the Government found that the Ladies' League was really doing effective work in keeping up the spirit of the people they would swoop down on the women too, and that it would hurt the Government more to arrest her (an English woman) in Ireland than it would to arrest an Irish woman, and would

⁹³ *Sinn Fein Weekly*, 16 October 1909.

⁹⁴ *Freeman's Journal*, 24 November 1885.

hurt them much more to arrest Miss Parnell in England than it would to arrest her in Ireland. Miss Taylor, who is one of the most intelligent women I ever met, if not the most intelligent, says the existence of the Gladstone Government is involved, that they will stop at nothing, rather than lose power...Miss Parnell's objection was that she could not be spared.⁹⁵

When Helen made this request it was no mere empty promise. She would have understood that there was a strong possibility of being imprisoned. The following months would see regular arrests of lady land leaguers at evictions. These, to their indignation, were arrested under an old statute of Edward III against unaccompanied women rather than, like the arrested men, as political prisoners.

On 24 December the Ladies' Land League was declared an illegal organisation and Anna sent a letter to the press that in the event of her imprisonment league correspondence should be sent to the care of Helen in London.⁹⁶ Hannah Reynolds was the first lady to be arrested and imprisoned at the end of the month for inciting tenants to resist eviction.⁹⁷ This was followed in the coming months by regular arrests and imprisonment of lady land leaguers in Ireland at the site of evictions.⁹⁸ Helen was putting her liberty on the line for the cause of Ireland, not just anti-landlordism but for Irish freedom. Following the ban on the organisation Anna Parnell called meetings of every branch, to be held on a Saturday in early January at 2pm as a challenge to the government to break up every meeting and arrest them all. The government backed down and the meetings were allowed to take place, the government not wanting to be seen to be arresting thousands of women; the threat to the Ladies' Land League passed.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ George, *The Life of Henry George*, p. 361.

⁹⁶ *The Nation*, 24 December 1881.

⁹⁷ *United Ireland*, 31 December 1881.

⁹⁸ See *The Nation* 1882 for regular reports on arrests and imprisonment of women land leaguers.

⁹⁹ *United Ireland*, 7 January 1882.

Throughout 1882 the Ladies battled on, supporting tenants, prisoners and their families, building land league huts, administrating and raising funds and clandestinely overseeing the printing and distribution of the banned land league newspaper, *United Ireland*. Helen continued her heavy workload in England, attending school board, Democratic Federation and land nationalisation meetings, as well as continuing her work for the land league movement. There were regular meetings of the branches of the Ladies' League that had been formed all over Britain which were reported in each edition of the nationalist newspapers, *The Nation* and *United Ireland*. These branches were often named after prominent supporters of the movement, for example, the *Mrs Delia Parnell Branch*, and two branches, the North London Group and Hulme in Manchester, were entitled the *Helen Taylor Branch*.¹⁰⁰ In January Helen spoke at a conference in London called by the Land Nationalisation Society.¹⁰¹ This was followed by a meeting in Liverpool to form a branch of the Democratic Federation, at which she declared that the time was 'ripe for revolutionary changes.'¹⁰² Interestingly, the same account records that she set out the form she thought Irish independence should take at this meeting: 'When the time came that Ireland was free, and the time she thought was not far distant (cheers) she hoped that Ireland would form part of a Britannic Federation.' This was compatible with the nationalist ideology of Michael Davitt, who would become a close colleague of Helen's in the British land campaigns of the 1880s. Davitt identified the main difference between Home Rulers and nationalists: the former demanded an Irish Parliament but would retain seats in an Imperial

¹⁰⁰ See reports of their meetings in *The Nation*.

¹⁰¹ *Irish Times*, 17 January 1882.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 18 January 1882.

Parliament in London while the nationalists wished to withdraw from representation in the British House of Commons:

I want Ireland to have a constitution similar to that in Canada - the Government to consist of a Lord Lieutenant or Governor, a Senate or Upper House and an Assembly or House of Commons... This Parliament should be elected upon the basis of Universal suffrage.¹⁰³

Thus Davitt foresaw an Irish parliament that would grant women the vote. Both he and Helen's other close male colleague for land reform Henry George championed women's rights, as will be discussed later. Even at the height of the Land War the place of women in society was central to Helen's actions; for her it was not a separate campaign.

As more arrests of the ladies continued to be reported by the press Helen gave a lecture to the North London Branch of the Land League of Great Britain on her experiences in Ireland at evictions; she continued to speak at meetings of the organisation during the coming months.¹⁰⁴ The Ladies' Land League, however, was coming to the end of its existence.

In April 1882 Charles Parnell was released from prison and accepted the 1881 Land Act, paving the way for a peasant proprietary and the end of the Land League. The male land leaguers were then released from prison. Helen can hardly have supported such a move. Both Davitt and Helen were land nationalists and they would continue in close political collaboration through the coming decade. Parnell, as stated earlier, disliked the women's organisation and cut off its funds. Henry George wrote to Patrick Ford, his editor in America, that the Irish MPs were 'getting frightened at the length to which the movement was going and were disposed to

¹⁰³ Michael Davitt in his *The Story of the Land War*, which was serialised in *The Nation*, 9 September 1882.

¹⁰⁴ *The Nation*, 14 January 1882.

unite with the Government on fixing up the Land Bill.’¹⁰⁵ On 12 August 1882 notice of the dissolution of the Ladies’ Land League was published in *The Nation*.¹⁰⁶

Helen’s views on the ending of the Land War are not recorded but, like her close colleagues, she would certainly have felt angry and betrayed by Parnell’s ending of the Land War and the winding up of the Land League. Anna, who remained Helen’s friend, felt strongly that the male land leaguers had run a sham of a campaign which had only benefited the better-off peasants at the expense of the landless poor and which had missed the chance to remove the British from Ireland. There is no reason to doubt that Helen would not have been in agreement with Anna’s assessment that:

However, long I might live; I knew that it would never again be possible for me to believe that any body of Irishmen meant a word of anything they said.¹⁰⁷

Henry George, another close friend of Helen for the rest of his life, concluded that ‘Parnell seems to me to have thrown away the greatest opportunity any Irishman ever had. It is the birth right for the mess of potage.’¹⁰⁸ Davitt later wrote that the Kilmainham treaty

...was the turning point in Mr Parnell’s career and he unfortunately turned in the wrong direction...He now resolved to surrender the Land League and to enter the new stage of his political fortunes as an opportunist statesman.¹⁰⁹

Davitt was angry at how the male land league had treated their female colleagues.

Henry George wrote that Davitt, on his release, did not attend the meeting of the parliamentary party (he had been elected as MP for Meath whilst in prison)¹¹⁰ called

¹⁰⁵ Henry George jnr., *The Life of Henry George*, p. 371.

¹⁰⁶ *The Nation*, 12 August 1882.

¹⁰⁷ Parnell, *The Tale of a Great Sham*, p.164.

¹⁰⁸ Henry George to Patrick Ford, 21 May 1882. Quoted in George, *The Life of Henry George*, p. 377.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, p. 349.

¹¹⁰ *The Nation*, 25 February 1882.

to discuss the formation of a new organisation, because he objected to the callous treatment of the women:

But when he found at the last moment that he could not even get a resolution of thanks to the Ladies' League upon the Mansion House programme he declined to take part or have his name included in the committee.¹¹¹

George wrote that the parliamentary party 'never seem to have really appreciated the work the ladies were doing' and that 'there was a constant jar going on between Kilmainham and 39 Sackville Street, the men seeking to curb what they saw as the extravagance of the women.'¹¹²

It is from George that we get the best insight into how the Ladies in the head office of the League felt when the campaign was called off. George wrote to Patrick Ford that, on the evening of the release of Parnell, the Ladies 'instead of rejoicing were like mourners at a wake,' knowing it was the end of the campaign and their involvement.¹¹³ George also wrote to Helen, who was in Avignon, informing her of the despair at the headquarters of the Ladies' Land League in October 1882:

Anna Parnell is well but has not been to the Land League since her illness. Miss Lynch has gone to Spain. A few of the Ladies remain doing some work for the Mansion House Committee, but the glory has departed. The women feel really bitter towards the Parliamentary men.¹¹⁴

He continued that the Ladies had given the men 'a very frantic piece of their minds' and that Virginia Lynch had threatened to throw one of them, Arthur O'Gorman, out of the window. Davitt, he felt, was mistaken 'in having anything to do with the Parliamentary crowd' but George hoped that 'good will come out of it though and after a period of quiet a more radical and more intelligent movement will result.' He

¹¹¹ Letter from Henry George, published in *The Irish World* and reprinted in *The Nation*, 14 October 1882.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ George, *The Life of Henry George*, p. 371.

¹¹⁴ Henry George to Anna Parnell, 1 October 1882, MTC, file 17, no. 81.

concluded that the School Board was not full use 'of your powers' and asked Helen to consider going to America to lecture. He and his wife felt 'much respect and admiration' and 'a warm and genuine friendship' for Helen. George's letter seems to suggest that Helen would concur with his summary of the situation.

Jessie Craigen, Helen's Democratic Federation colleague, also wrote to her on 19 August 1882 about the end of the campaign. She believed that Parnell had 'sold himself to the ministry.'¹¹⁵ When she had recently met Parnell he had been very cold, a change from his previous encouragement of her work for the Ladies. She continued, 'From these circumstances I infer the truth of my information as his having turned traitor to the national cause.' What is intriguing about this letter is that Helen and Jessie had obviously had a disagreement. Jessie concluded:

I beg you to forgive all hasty words and to read my letters. I love you more than life. I want nothing of you except that you will let me be a comfort to you as you used to tell me once that I was.

A letter from Priscilla McLaren to Helen on 21 September 1882 refers to a disagreement between Jessie and Helen. Jessie had returned to working for women's suffrage and had been worried about re-joining the movement, as the suffragists were in disagreement with Helen and Jessie did not want to upset her.¹¹⁶ Sandra Holton cites Jessie's friendship with Helen as an example of a Victorian romantic friendship. Holton concludes that the argument between them stemmed from her attack on Parnell quoted above:

(Jessie) was soon reporting to Helen Taylor her disillusion with Charles Parnell, and her conviction that he was about to sell out the Land League in return for a post in Gladstone's government. Helen Taylor chose to regard such independence of thought as a sign of personal disloyalty, and she deliberately distanced herself from Jessie Craigen's outraged, and no doubt outrageous, stand in Ireland. She refused

¹¹⁵ Jessie Craigen to Helen Taylor, MTC, file 18, no. 71.

¹¹⁶ Priscilla McLaren to Helen Taylor, 21 September 1882, MTC, file 13, no. 237.

any further contact with her ardent admirer, but mutual friends recorded how nonetheless Jessie Craigen continued to love Helen Taylor ‘with all the fervour of her passionate nature’ and how she ‘was dazed with anguish’ at the breach.¹¹⁷

The evidence presented in this thesis shows that, far from being annoyed at Jessie’s attack on Parnell, Helen was most likely to have agreed that Parnell had betrayed the Irish land movement. Presumably Jessie’s claim that ‘has sold himself to the ministry’ is what makes Holton conclude that ‘he was about to sell out the Land League in return for a post in Gladstone’s government’. This sentiment is in keeping with the language of Irish nationalists like Davitt, who used phrases indicating treachery, such as ‘the sale of the land league’, or land reformers like George, who wrote of the sale of ‘the birth right for the mess of potage,’ both suggesting a Judas figure who had betrayed the land movement. Why should Helen take Jessie’s view on Parnell as a slight when, as has been shown above, Helen’s friends and colleagues in the land reform movement felt the same sense of having been betrayed by him? For those who wanted to go beyond peasant proprietorship, including Helen, Davitt and George, such views would not be ‘outrageous’; neither would they be so among the Irish-American nationalists of Clan na Gael. Jessie was not showing ‘independence of thought’ but rather expressing a view held by a section of land reformers and Irish nationalists.

Ethel Leach, a close friend of Helen’s, a School Board member in Great Yarmouth and Ladies’ Land League supporter, wrote to Helen at the time of the divorce scandal, which engulfed Parnell’s political career in 1890. Her letter may shed light on what would almost certainly have been Helen’s reaction to Parnell and the

¹¹⁷ Sandra Stanley Holton, ‘Silk dresses and lavender kid gloves: the wayward career of Jessie Craigen, working suffragist’, *Women’s History Review*, vol. 5, no. 6 (London, 1996), p. 139.

Kilmainham Treaty and the demise of the Ladies' Land League. The tone of Ethel's letter suggests that she and Helen would be in agreement on the views expressed.

Their correspondence in the Mill Taylor Collection shows similar views and political agreement. Both kept in contact with Anna Parnell. Ethel wrote:

For my part I cannot see how the matter [*i.e. the divorce scandal*] need affect the question of Home Rule at all, I was not working for Mr Parnell but the cause of the Irish people and if he and all his parl (*sic*) party disgrace themselves the need for justice to Ireland will remain... You and Miss Parnell and I would have known better than to trust him [*i.e. Gladstone*] or any of the wire pullers, he ought to have been compelled to define the principles of his bill long ago, surely he will have to do so now, and thus there may be a silver lining to this cloud.¹¹⁸

So the political participation of Helen in the Land War ended and with it Irish women's ability to influence nationalism for a generation. Helen had defied the conventions of separate spheres to take part, will show how she asserted her feminism and influence within the British land movement and played a leading role within the land reforming organisations. She had faced imprisonment and the wrath of both the British Government and the British feminist movement in the name of what she believed to be a just cause which any liberal worthy of the name was morally obliged to support. She had fought for the right of ordinary people to enjoy security in their working lives, a decent standard of living and political self-determination. Her feminism had joined with that of Anna Parnell to appeal to both Irish and British women to become actively involved in the campaign. That was an appeal to which many British suffragists could not react positively, fearing it would undermine the campaign for suffrage. The Land War had ended and the Ladies were disbanded but Helen turned to the land campaigns throughout Great Britain to continue her active work for nationalisation of the land.

¹¹⁸ Ethel Leach to Helen Taylor, 6 December 1890, MTC, file 18, no. 49.

Helen Taylor's work for land reform in Great Britain 1879- 1907

The demise of the Ladies' Land League and the end of the Land War in Ireland did not diminish the importance of the land question throughout the British Isles. On the contrary, it was to grow as a movement, reach its peak during the 1880s and remain as an important political concern until the beginning of the First World War.¹¹⁹ In July 1880 Henry George had sent copies of his *Progress and Poverty* to reformers in England in the hope of igniting the land question there.¹²⁰ He believed that 'a movement has commenced there of which neither side yet see the importance.'¹²¹ By Christmas of that same year George was looking forward to the imminent English publication of his book in England, it having been first published in the United States.¹²²

Throughout the 1880s and 1890s Helen Taylor was a leading player in the campaigns surrounding land. She was on the executive of the Democratic Federation (later renamed the Social Democratic Federation), which had, as a founding tenet, land nationalisation.¹²³ Throughout the 1880s she toured the British Isles, speaking on land reform as an executive member of the Land Nationalisation Society and the Land Restoration League. Helen remained active in these organisations well into the 1890s. She continued to share platforms and friendships with leading land reformers, most notably Alfred Russel Wallace, Henry George and Michael Davitt, and supported the crofters in their struggle against the landlords in the Scottish Highlands, the campaigns of the Welsh Land League, English

¹¹⁹ See Bull *Irish Land and British Politics*, in Cragoe & Readman (eds.), *The Land Question in Britain 1750–1950*, (Basingstoke, 2010) chapter 7, p.153.

¹²⁰ Henry George to Sir George Grey, 3 July 1880, Henry George General Correspondence (HGGC).

¹²¹ Henry George to Sir George Grey, 30 November 1880, HGGC.

¹²² Henry George to Mr Coffrey, 15 Dec 1880, HGGC.

¹²³ Helen was at the inaugural meeting of the Democratic Federation on 8 June 1881, which voted to include land nationalisation in its programme (*Glasgow Herald*, 9 June 1881; see also next chapter).

agricultural workers and the urban landless working class, whose appalling living conditions and poverty were blamed by campaigners on the existence of private ownership of land. Debates on land took centre stage throughout the 1880s in British political life, as evidenced through extensive newspaper coverage. Contemporary accounts placed Helen at the forefront of land campaign. Yet her contribution has been partially considered or totally ignored in the historiography.

Helen's political agency within the British land movement

The importance of Helen to the burgeoning land movement was three-fold. She was a leading activist in all land reforming groups and drew large audiences; she had independent means which enabled her to fund the organisations she was involved in and exert influence on them; and her background as John Stuart Mill's step-daughter and intellectual collaborator put her in the position of being able to introduce the leading players in the 1880s land campaigns to one another. Helen introduced Henry George and Michael Davitt to the leadership of the British land movement and thus enabled their involvement. Davitt's and George's importance in British land campaigns has been documented by historians but the woman who was instrumental in facilitating their involvement has been largely forgotten.

During the height of the Irish Land War in 1881, which, as previously illustrated, brought land ownership back as a central political concern, the Land Nationalisation Society was founded in London by Canning Swinton, a Dr Wallace, Helen Taylor, Mr T.F. Walker, Colonel S.D. Williams and others.¹²⁴ During the 1880s and 1890s

¹²⁴ Edwards, *Land and real tariff Reform; being The Land Reformers' Handbook for 1909*, p. 86.

Helen was one of its Vice Presidents.¹²⁵ The society campaigned to abolish freehold on land, for ‘the establishment of universal State tenancy’¹²⁶ and, unlike George, though after some debate, to compensate landlords after land reform.¹²⁷ The Land Reformers’ Handbook of 1909 recounts its public meetings and lectures (at which Helen was a frequent speaker) and its leaflets and publications. By 1909 it would have 180 MPs as vice presidents and 130 MPs as members of the Public Landownership Parliamentary Council. There were 96 publications under its name and its monthly journal, *Land and Labour*, ran for twenty years.¹²⁸

During her involvement in the Ladies’ Land League, Helen had also been a regular speaker under the auspices of the Land Nationalisation Society. Davitt had seen during the Land War the need to extend the agitation to Great Britain and obtain the support of the British working class and agricultural workers:

Flinging wide the net of the movement, the Land League of Great Britain was formed out of the organization of the Home Rule confederation in 1880.....Steps were likewise taken to carry the Land League propaganda into the Highlands in order to stir up a crofter revolt against Scottish landlordism.¹²⁹

On the demise of the Ladies’ organisation in the summer of 1882 Helen turned her attention to supporting these campaigns. During 1883 Davitt and Helen worked together to rekindle unrest among the English agricultural workers and demand the reform of the English land laws. The first meeting of the campaign was held in Milborne St Andrews, Dorset with them both as speakers and had a large attendance

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹²⁹ Davitt, *The Fall of Feudalism*, p. 228.

with a torchlight procession through the village.¹³⁰ Helen had long been an advocate for the demands of English agricultural workers and, during the Kent and Sussex agricultural labourers' unrest of 1878 against high rents and tithes, had spoken at a meeting held in London in their support.¹³¹

During 1883, as land campaigns escalated in Scotland and Wales, Helen's work for land organisations increased, despite the demands of her work on the London School Board. Late in 1882 she had won re-election to the Southwark seat, in a bitter contest, having been opposed by the local Liberal Association for her stand on Ireland. She had also been attacked in pamphlets and leaflets by leading landowners, including the Duke of Westminster and Lord Abinger. During her school board campaigning she had used the opportunity to remind electors that the land had been stolen from the people.¹³² Throughout 1882 she attended meetings for land reform the length and breadth of Britain. Over in America Henry George was aware of the growing impetus of the land movement and wrote encouragingly to T. Walker of the Land Nationalisation Society, 'From all I can learn the movement is started in England so thoroughly that there can be no going back.'¹³³

Shortly after attending the annual demonstration of the National Agricultural Workers Union, where she attacked the feudal land laws and called for an extension of the franchise to the counties, Helen attended a meeting called to form a new group in London, the Land Reform Union, at which she gave the audience a

¹³⁰ *Huddersfield Chronicle and West Yorkshire Advertiser*, 3 November 1883 and *Bristol Mercury and Daily Post*, 14 November 1883.

¹³¹ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 21 November 1878.

¹³² Helen wrote to Henry George giving him this summary of her campaign and outcome, 7 January 1883, HGGC.

¹³³ Henry George to T. Walker, 27 March 1883, HGGC.

laudatory outline of George's philosophy on land and praised the endeavours of Davitt to abolish landlordism.¹³⁴ This new Georgeite group superseded the Land Law Reform Union, which had been created in 1880 by the Radical, Charles Braudlaugh, and which had been short lived as Braudlaugh was taken up with his campaign to be allowed to sit in Parliament without taking the religious oath of allegiance.

The Land Reform Union comprised an alliance of the Land Nationalisation Society and the Democratic Federation and emerged after a series of meetings to discuss George's book.¹³⁵ Helen was, yet again, at the centre of the creation of a reform organisation. The new organisation swiftly invited George to return to England and undertake a lecture tour on their behalf with his expenses paid; Helen was one of those who funded the trip.¹³⁶ George arrived in Liverpool in late December 1883. The newspapers show Helen to have been active throughout this year lecturing for land. By the late autumn of that year the Welsh agitation had attracted the attention of the press with Helen lecturing in North Wales. *The Irish Times*, reporting on this 'attempt to inflame the quiet spirit of the Principality', recorded that Helen was at the forefront of the new campaign: 'At present a lady has made the most prominent figure on the Welsh Land League platform.'¹³⁷ Her speeches in Wales, for the Land Nationalisation Society, emphasised that the land should belong to those born there.¹³⁸ Although the land movement's aims were to create a mass movement for change throughout all the British Isles it was always the Celtic countries which

¹³⁴ *The Bristol Mercury*, 15 May 1883, *Northern Echo*, 6 June 1883 and *West London Advertiser*, 9 June 1883.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ George, *The Life of Henry George*, pp. 415–22.

¹³⁷ *The Irish Times*, 28 November 1883.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 20 November 1883.

provided the campaign with its impetus. Though there was an urban aspect to the land question (introduced by Henry George), it never fired the imagination in England in the same way. For there was no information for the land campaigners on land ownership in London (the 1873 *Return of Landowners* did not include London). Moreover, the land question in England was not an integral part of a national question, unlike Ireland and, to a lesser extent, Wales and Scotland.¹³⁹

In 1884, as the land movement made further advances into national consciousness, Helen increased her involvement in the reform organisations and the lecture tours they promoted. That year saw the emergence of a rival reforming organisation to the Land Nationalisation Society through the creation of the English Land Restoration League, though many reformers, Helen included, were members of both. Arguments between followers of Henry George and Hyndman's Marxist Democratic Federation led to the Georgeites within the Land Reform Union taking control, defeating the socialists of the Democratic Federation and renaming the new organisation they formed the Land Restoration League.¹⁴⁰ The League's objective was the taxation of the 'unimproved value of land' and it supported legislation for 'separate valuation of land, and for making land values the basis of national and local taxation, adhering to George's teaching on land'.¹⁴¹ It has been claimed that the formation of the Land Restoration League was the end of the joint collaboration between Georgeites and land nationalists.¹⁴² This is, however, an inaccurate portrayal.

¹³⁹ Roland Quinault, 'London and the Land Question,' in Cragoe & Readman (eds.), *The Land Question in Britain 1750–1950*, (Basingstoke, 2010), chapter 9, p. 168.

¹⁴⁰ Lawrence, *Henry George in the British Isles*, p.34.

¹⁴¹ Edwards, *Land and real tariff Reform; being The Land Reformers' Handbook for 1909*, p. 77.

¹⁴² Lawrence, *Henry George in the British Isles*, p. 36.

Helen's views as a socialist in the Social Democratic Federation on the schism are not recorded, but her actions prove that Lawrence makes too much of the split. It was not the schism he suggests. Many prominent campaigners remained in both organisations and Helen was on the executive of both, despite her opposition to the Georgeite tenet of no compensation for land owners and her socialism. Time and again in speeches she came out as a land nationaliser and linked it with her socialism, which Henry George never embraced. 'She was a socialist first and a land nationaliser afterwards,'¹⁴³ and at a meeting in Shoreditch later that spring Helen said, 'I am a land nationaliser but I am also proud to proclaim myself a socialist.'¹⁴⁴ Her belief that both the Land Restoration League and the Land Nationalisation Society were working towards land nationalisation was a view common within reforming circles. The first edition of *Land and Labour*, the paper of the Land Nationalisation Society, in 1889 declared in its opening address that, despite differences, in particular its own insistence on compensating landlords after nationalisation, which was opposed by the Georgeites, and that local bodies should control the land for the state, the two organisations were not incompatible:

The two methods, however, are not antagonistic, but at the most alternative, as a matter of fact, many of the members of this society are members of the league also, and go in for both methods which lead to the same ends.....Mr George's is the most simple method, Dr Wallace's the most direct.¹⁴⁵

Despite, therefore, her long support and membership of the Land Restoration League and her friendship with George, Helen, as a socialist, never embraced his single tax theories, though she thought highly of his work, was instrumental in building his popularity through her friendship and gave him public support. Her opinions on this and why she could be a member of the Land Restoration League are

¹⁴³ *Justice*, 2 Feb 1884.

¹⁴⁴ *Justice*, 5 April 1884.

¹⁴⁵ *Land and Labour*, November 1889.

clarified in a draft letter she wrote to the Scottish Land Restoration Union in 1895 to thank them for a copy of a single tax tract and to pay her subscription to them:

At the same time I wish to say that I entirely disagree in the opinion that the 'Single Tax' would restore the Land to the People in as much as, at best, it would only restore most of the revenue of the land, leaving wealthy capitalists who may choose to sacrifice large revenues (as they do at present) in order to obtain political influence which will bring them still larger sums, free as at present, to use the land as a means of compulsion or bribery. But the name 'Land Restoration' which was adopted by Mr Henry George from my suggestion, implies a wholly different theory of rights and of objects, founded on my own historical view of the subject, and I am very glad that the English and Scottish League and Union by adopting that name are carrying on the real work of educating the population to the perception of their real and historical rights which will remain intact and the need of them, I fear, as peremptory as ever after the single tax has been tried ~~and failed if it ever is tried~~. (sic)¹⁴⁶

The English Land Restoration League was to become very influential and immediately set to work promoting George's land theories:

The League at once organised a second lecturing tour for Henry George and the campaign opened with a series of meetings in London, and closed with a great demonstration in the heart of the city... Leaflets were issued by the 100,000, innumerable meetings (often small, mostly in workingmen's clubs, at street corners or in the public parks) were addressed by members of the League, parliamentary candidates were heckled, editors of newspapers worried with letters, and Parliament itself was petitioned.¹⁴⁷

Helen had a heavy lecturing schedule throughout 1884. In January she lectured in Birmingham for the Land Nationalisation Society, again praising the work of Davitt and George for bringing the land question into practical politics,¹⁴⁸ and continued her speaking in Swansea and West Hartlepool.¹⁴⁹ Likewise, she lectured for the English Land Restoration League, took the chair at their conference in London that October¹⁵⁰ and shared speaking engagements for the League with Henry George,

¹⁴⁶ Draft letter to Scottish Land Restoration Union, 11 Nov 1895, MTC, file 17, no. 146.

¹⁴⁷ Edwards, *Land and real tariff Reform; being The Land Reformers' Handbook for 1909*, p. 77.

¹⁴⁸ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 23 January 1884.

¹⁴⁹ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 11 February 1884.

¹⁵⁰ *Huddersfield Daily Chronicle*, 8 October 1884.

including a large meeting at St James Hall on 19 November.¹⁵¹ Helen also brought her land campaigning into her other engagements. The British miners were engaged in a strike against a reduction in their wages which Helen supported by speaking at their meetings and speaking on land.¹⁵² The press reported her popularity among the working class and the enthusiastic welcome she received when speaking.¹⁵³

During 1884 unrest in Scotland escalated and Helen, through her work with the Land Nationalisation Society and Land Restoration League, supported the crofters in their struggle against the landlords. There were three main causes of the Crofter War of the early 1880s in the Scottish Highlands. Firstly, the influence and strength of the Liberal Party in Scotland, with its radical anti-landlord element; secondly, the huge Irish emigrant population of Glasgow which provided mass audiences for Davitt and the Land League (Helen was a frequent speaker at these), and, thirdly, the popularity and growing fame of the teachings of Henry George.¹⁵⁴ The 1873 Return of Landowners had shown that 1,758 landowners owned 97.8 per cent of the land in Scotland.¹⁵⁵ The Highlands had been cleared in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century to make way for more profitable sheep farming. Life on the Western Isles was reminiscent of the poverty of the Irish peasants, the crofters living in hovels on small barren holdings.¹⁵⁶ One Skye landlord still extracted feudal labour from his tenants as well as rent.¹⁵⁷ The Scottish crofters had no security of tenure, rising rents, poverty and the ever-present fear of eviction.

¹⁵¹ *The Democrat*, 15 November 1884.

¹⁵² See chapter 5.

¹⁵³ *Dundee Courier and Argus*, 28 July 1884 and *Daily Post*, 14 August 1884.

¹⁵⁴ Ewen A. Cameron, ‘“Setting the Heather on Fire” The Land Question in Scotland 1850–1914,’ Cragoe & Readman (eds), *The Land Question in Britain 1750–1950* (2010), chapter 6, p. 109.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

¹⁵⁶ Roy Douglas, *Land, People and Politics*, p. 60.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

Following a series of bad harvests, the early 1880s saw increasing unrest among the crofters. In 1881 a huge demonstration occurred in Glasgow in support of the Irish Land League; speakers called attention to the evictions happening on Skye. The Irish Land League then voted that one thousand pounds be sent to aid the crofters.¹⁵⁸ Davitt recounts the sending of Edward McHugh by the Land League's Dublin executive to Skye 'as an emissary of the anti-landlord movement.'¹⁵⁹ This outsider agitation has been cited as an important cause of the escalation of the disturbances in 1882, rather than the unrest stemming from within the crofter community.¹⁶⁰ The Skye Vigilance Committee was drawn up¹⁶¹ and this group later formed the Federation of Celtic Societies, which pledged to help the crofters oppose the landlords.¹⁶²

During 1882 the Highland Land League branches spread throughout Scotland. These, though vague in their aspirations, made good use of Henry George at meetings (this was during his 1882 tour of Great Britain). However, the Highland Land League was not a single tax group and seems to have favoured peasant proprietorship, although it was more of a pressure group than anything similar to the direct action Irish Land League.¹⁶³ It remained separate from the Scottish Land Restoration League which Helen was involved in. The crofters themselves were not demanding peasant proprietorship and their agitation seemed to be motivated by a

¹⁵⁸ Crowley, D.W., 'The Crofter's Party 1885–1892: The First British Independent Common People's Party,' *Scottish Historical Review*, vol. 35 (1956).

¹⁵⁹ Davitt, *The Fall of Feudalism*, p. 228.

¹⁶⁰ Crowley, 'The Crofter's Party 1885–1892: The First British Independent Common People's Party,' p. 3.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*, p. 2.

¹⁶² *Ibid*, p. 4.

¹⁶³ *Ibid*.

desire to achieve protected tenancies.¹⁶⁴ During 1882 there had been much unrest and increasing violence in the Highlands and police from Glasgow had been sent to Skye to restore order after crofters withheld their rents. This followed the attempts of landlords to take more land for pasturage. The Federation of Celtic Societies petitioned parliament and a Royal Commission was set up which recommended security of tenure on crofts worth more than six pounds in rent and concluded that tenants should be encouraged to follow other employment.¹⁶⁵ In the General Election of 1885 two Highland Land League members and three independent crofters were returned to parliament, defeating official Liberal candidates. This and renewed violence on Skye in 1886, when police and soldiers were sent to deal with an escalation of unrest during the election campaign, led to the new Liberal Government passing the 1886 Crofters Act.¹⁶⁶ This gave the crofters security of tenure, fair rents and compensation for improvements. It did not, however, give the Scottish the three 'Fs' (fair rent, free sale and fixity of tenure) obtained by the Irish in the 1881 Land Act, as it did not allow free sale. Also it did not give them the land redistribution which they had demanded; but it did lead to the Scottish land question fading as a political issue.¹⁶⁷ The national and local press reported widely on the Scottish disturbances. *Justice*, the paper of the Democratic Federation, or Social Democratic Federation as it became that year, gave extensive coverage to what became known as the Crofter Wars, as did Davitt's *Democrat*.¹⁶⁸ The Land Restoration League sent George on a lecture tour of Scotland and the Highlanders

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ Crowley, 'The Crofter's Party 1885–1892: The First British Independent Common People's Party,' p. 5.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9 and Cameron, "'Setting the Heather on Fire" The Land Question in Scotland 1850 – 1914,' pp. 116 and 119.

¹⁶⁸ See chapter 5.

and crofters' messages of thanks for English support were read out at meetings which Helen attended during 1884.¹⁶⁹

Helen continued being heavily involved in speaking on land campaigns throughout the next three years, her presence at meetings being recorded by the press. She remained as an executive member of the two leading land reform organisations and continued to attend meetings in support of the miners, attending two in Derbyshire in July 1885.¹⁷⁰ By this time she had fallen out with Hyndman and was no longer a member of the Social Democratic Federation. Helen was at the height of her public fame. *The Lancashire Evening Post* heralded her arrival to speak in the area as a visit from the leading woman of the epoch.¹⁷¹ She continued her support of the Scottish and Welsh agitations and spoke at a meeting in support of the crofters in Exeter Hall, London, called to protest at the arrest of the Rev Dr John Macpherson, a prominent Scottish land campaigner. This meeting received detailed press coverage and was attended by five hundred supporters of the agitation. Helen moved that a memorandum on the matter should be sent to the Queen, which was carried, and a collection was made in support of the crofters.¹⁷²

The British land movement was internationalist in outlook. It expressed support for Henry George in his unsuccessful bid to become mayor of New York. A meeting Helen attended of the journal *Land and Labour*, which supported the principles of land restoration, showed the internationalism of the socialist land reformers, as they passed a resolution in support of American workers in their campaign to return

¹⁶⁹ *Freeman's Journal*, 20 November 1884.

¹⁷⁰ *Leeds Mercury*, 21 July 1885.

¹⁷¹ *The Lancashire Evening Post*, 19 October 1886.

¹⁷² *The Times*, 9 December 1886.

George as mayor. Helen was part of a movement which looked beyond the concerns of the British worker and made links across national boundaries.¹⁷³ In a personal letter to George, Helen wished him success in his mayoral campaign and asked for news reports of his speeches to be sent to her.¹⁷⁴ Helen expressed time and again in her letters to the Georges her hope of travelling to lecture in the United States and they continued to urge her to come over.¹⁷⁵ She was, however, often suffering from ill-health and retreated regularly to the better climate of Avignon to recover. In March 1886 she had had to cancel a lecture on Free Education, which she passionately believed in, and return to France to recover.¹⁷⁶ The previous month she had also had to cancel her presence at a pivotal meeting called to form a Welsh Land League in Flint, Wales, organised by Davitt to spread agrarian unrest through boycotting and agitation throughout the Principality.¹⁷⁷ There is no doubt that this recurring ill-health curbed her involvement in British political life and in the following years up to her death in 1907 her absences from the scene, due to illness, were to increase. Time and again in her letters over the last twenty years of her life she and her correspondents referred to illness keeping her away from political developments over in England. Until the last seven years of her life, her correspondence was heavy with requests for her to come and speak, especially on the land question, but she often had to plead unfitness to attend.

Helen and Michael Davitt worked closely with the Welsh Radicals demanding land reform throughout the 1880s and were involved in the setting up of the Welsh Land League (which, though mooted as about to be formed in 1883 in the *Irish Times*

¹⁷³ *The Times*, 2 November 1886.

¹⁷⁴ Helen Taylor to Henry George, 12 October 1886, HGGC.

¹⁷⁵ For example, Helen Taylor to Henry George, 12 October 1886, HGGC.

¹⁷⁶ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 19 March 1886.

¹⁷⁷ *Western Mail*, 6 February 1886 and *North Wales Chronicle*, 13 February 1886.

report quoted above, was in fact not set up until 1887). For the last twenty years of the nineteenth century Welsh land reform became a radical concern, following a Welsh Radical MP, Tom Ellis's demand that the three 'Fs' which had been granted to Irish tenants be extended to Wales.¹⁷⁸ Davitt hoped to spread his 'Plan of Campaign', which was demanding more reform in Ireland, to the Principality. In Ireland land reform was linked to the demand for independence. This, though, was not always the case in Wales, since Welsh tenants were far better-off economically than their Irish counterparts. There was not the problem of absentee landlords and tenancies were usually hereditary, giving security. There were also no middle men (the land agents) in Wales.¹⁷⁹ The main difficulties for tenants in Wales were the lack of capital in Welsh agriculture and the cultural separation of the landlord and tenant (as in Ireland). The English-speaking landowner was usually part of the established Anglican church of Wales while his tenants were dissenting chapel-goers who often spoke Welsh.¹⁸⁰ This made the Welsh land question political and cultural rather than predominantly economic, despite under-investment.¹⁸¹ However, the level of violence against the landlords remained low compared to that experienced over in Ireland.¹⁸² In 1890 Gladstone's Land Commission diffused the situation by legislating for a reduction in rents and the campaign petered out.¹⁸³

However, in 1886 farmers throughout Wales had started to withhold their rents. Davitt attended two meetings in February 1886 in Flint and Blaenau Ffestiniog, at which he called for the Welsh to form a land league, hoping to spread the continuing

¹⁷⁸ Matthew Cragoe, 'A Contemptible Mimic' Cragoe & Readman, (eds), *The Land Question in Britain 1750 – 1950* (2010), chapter 5, p. 92. I am indebted to Cragoe for this background on Wales.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p.95.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid*, p.96.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid*, p.97.

¹⁸² Cragoe, 'A Contemptible Mimic,' p.97.

¹⁸³ *Ibid*, p.102.

Irish agitation through his 'Plan of Campaign' to Wales. Later that year the Welsh 'Tithe War' began, following the establishment of the Anti-Tithe League in September. The Welsh farmers objected to paying tithes to the established Anglican Church because they were Nonconformists. This anti-tithe campaign was led by Thomas Gee, who also demanded the three 'Fs' for Welsh farmers. Outbreaks of unrest escalated in Wales as farmers protested against tithes. In 1887 the Welsh Land League was formed, into which the Anti-Tithe League was absorbed, the two campaign groups having been involved with each other for some time. The newly formed Welsh Land, Commercial and Labour League had similar demands to the Irish and Scottish leagues, showing the latter's influence on the Welsh league. These were fair rent, fixity of tenure, compensation for improvements, land courts, limits on mining royalties, withdrawal of state loans to landowners, state loans to tenants to enable land purchase, abolition of game laws and free fishing to be allowed in all rivers. By 1889 the disturbances had spread to South Wales and there was a similar, though less aggressive anti-tithe movement in England. The government passed a bill in 1890 which made tithes payable by the landlord not the tenant and the agitation died down, although it remained simmering in the background until the disestablishment of the Anglican Church in the 1920s.¹⁸⁴

Helen thus continued her land campaigning, travelling throughout the country under the auspices of the Land Nationalisation Society and the Land Restoration League, lecturing on Land Restoration and promoting industrial villages.¹⁸⁵ She wrote to Henry George, 'I am going much among the workers in every part of England,

¹⁸⁴ I am indebted for this information to Douglas, *Land, People and Politics: A History of the Land Question in the United Kingdom 1875–1952*.

¹⁸⁵ *Hampshire Telegraph*, 30 April 1887, *Reynolds Newspaper*, 5 June 1887, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 9 June 1887 and 7 July 1887.

breaking new ground in villages and small towns.’¹⁸⁶ Her work was curtailed, however, in 1888 by the illness of her brother, Algernon, whom she visited in Devon to nurse and help financially by paying doctor’s fees. Helen had always been supportive of Algernon, whose wife had died, leaving him with three young children. Algernon had become a strict vegetarian, had developed an eating disorder and was starving himself to death through his restrictive diet.¹⁸⁷ His life was in danger and Helen gave up her campaigning work to nurse him. Although preoccupied with her family during much of 1888, the December edition of the Land Nationalisation Society publication *Land and Labour* was ‘very glad to record the return to England of Miss Helen Taylor who has already commenced an active lecture campaign in Lancashire and Wales.’¹⁸⁸ She had recuperated in Avignon.

When able to leave him [*Algernon*] again I was so exhausted that I had only the energy left to fly straight here, where spring and sunshine and solitude are gradually restoring my energies.¹⁸⁹

The land movement was proving increasingly popular towards the end of the nineteenth century. Helen was optimistic that they would achieve something lasting:

I hope that you are satisfied with the progress made in England on Land Nationalisation. For my part I think there is nothing to fear except the usual English passion for half-measures and subsequent astonishment that the half is not as great as the whole... We shall look upon a tax of 4 / in the £ as a revolution and then be indignant with land nationalisation that it has done nothing for us after all.¹⁹⁰

The Land Nationalisation Society’s Annual General Meeting of 1889 was able to record that 134 lectures had been delivered that year and 260,000 tracts distributed.¹⁹¹ So popular were Helen’s lectures that one organiser wrote:

¹⁸⁶ Helen Taylor to Henry George, 16 August 1888, MTC, file 17, no. 82

¹⁸⁷ See letters between Algernon Taylor and Helen, MTC, file 24.

¹⁸⁸ *Land and Labour*, December 1888.

¹⁸⁹ Helen Taylor to Henry George, 12 April 1889, HGGC.

¹⁹⁰ Helen Taylor to Henry George, 12 April 1889, HGGC.

¹⁹¹ *The Times*, 8 June 1889.

We are able now to offer you a much larger hall which will be filled if you consent to visit us. The success of your lecture last season and the continual growth of interest in radical topics....¹⁹²

She seems to have been well enough during 1890 to take on a full programme of lectures which were recorded in *Land and Labour* of that year. The publication regularly requested organisers to write in with requests for Helen to speak that they wished to be considered. However, Helen's political involvement physically in the land movement declined rapidly during the 1890s, as ill-health became more frequent. Letters between Helen and fellow reformers refer increasingly to the fact that health problems were restricting her involvement until she ceased corresponding with the movement in the last years of her life, which she spent mentally confused.¹⁹³

Helen's political writing on land

A major factor to be considered as to why Helen has not received full attention in the historiography as a politically active woman is that she left very little in the way of writings in comparison, for example, to Annie Besant. She did, however, set out clearly her ideas on land reform in a tract which was widely sold and distributed by the Land Restoration League. In 1888 she wrote and published a pamphlet entitled *Nationalisation of the Land*. It summarised the programme of the Land Nationalisation Society and was first published in the *Liberal and Radical Yearbook*, being intended to be sold at open meetings of the society as it attempted to spread the gospel of land nationalisation throughout the towns and villages of Great Britain, especially among the working class. It was one of a series of pamphlets issued by the society for direct sale to supporters at two shillings per

¹⁹² Herbert Mills to Helen Taylor re: forthcoming lecture in Kendal, 9 October 1890, MTC, file18, no. 57.

¹⁹³ See chapter 6.

hundred copies. It set out why nationalisation was necessary and how this could be achieved. These ideas located her firmly in the radical world into which she was born, the world of John Stuart Mill.

The pamphlet began with her step-father's claim that she was dealing here with 'fundamental principles' that, because land was a finite commodity, its use had to entail the 'common right'. Individual ownership of the land interfered with this.¹⁹⁴ The argument for nationalisation had a moral dimension. Rent paid to a landlord was at the expense of the community as a whole because the only person who benefited from the improvement of the land by the tenant was the owner, who could charge more rent on the improved land without any industry on his part. Rent thus inhibited 'enterprise and energy'¹⁹⁵ not only among agricultural workers but also within cities, where the private landlord profited from the toil of industrial workers through levels of rent which left the working class in overcrowded, unsanitary and vice-ridden conditions. Here they experienced 'moral, mental and physical weakness.'¹⁹⁶ The monopoly of land by private individuals was for Helen and her fellow campaigners the major cause of poverty in the modern world and would negate any attempts by governments to ameliorate the lives of its people through legislation. Rent would always put money in the landlords' pockets. So, she asked, how could life be improved for the working class?¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁴ Helen Taylor, *Nationalisation of the Land*, 1888, Land Nationalisation Tracts – No. XIX, Bristol Selected Pamphlets 1888, University of Bristol Library, URL:<http://www.jstor.org/stable/60249652>, p. 1.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 2.

¹⁹⁶ Helen Taylor, *Nationalisation of the Land*, p. 2.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 3.

Helen refuted as untenable current ideas in society which, some argued, would bring about an improvement in the situation. She looked, firstly, at the moral argument that if landowners were good Christians who led their lives in 'a spirit of active and disinterested benevolence' then the only drawbacks of private land ownership would rest in the individual's lack of intelligence or the activity of the landowners. This argument she rejected as unacceptable to any 'competent statesman or law-giver'.¹⁹⁸ Next she rejected the benefit of extending private land ownership by legislating for the sale of land to tenant farmers. The demand for peasant proprietorship had a wide appeal at the time and, as previously discussed, had many supporters in Britain and Ireland and was advocated by Charles Parnell. Helen saw serious drawbacks to such schemes as compared to nationalisation of the land. She was prepared to concede that in utilitarian terms increased land ownership would lead to 'greater happiness for a greater number' and that increased activity on the land would improve the economy and social life. However, putting the land into the private ownership of a greater number of people and abolishing primogeniture, entail and settlement would, she believed, not solve the problem of access to land for all.¹⁹⁹

A better thought-out scheme, although in Helen's opinion still a flawed solution, would be heavy taxation of land, as advocated by Henry George. This taxation would enable the state to receive a high percentage of the rent and also encourage the landowner to rent out land to defray the personal cost of the tax due – the landowner would be liable for tax whether or not the land was rented out. Helen's tract went on to dismiss this form of land reform because the burden of the tax would fall on the tenant in the form of rent and would lead to rack-renting, as the

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

landlord increased the rent to defray the cost of the tax and, thereby, maintain his profit. If the tax were imposed at a level which would 'equal the highest rent possible' to avoid this rack-renting then the tenant would be burdened with the whole of it. Meanwhile, the rich landowner could afford the tax and keep his land for his own use.²⁰⁰ For Helen, the only positive effect of such a scheme was that there would be no further necessity for any further taxation but that would require a government which did not misappropriate the taxation to finance a war and 'other objects not less mischievous and immoral than those to which rent is applied now.'²⁰¹

Helen thus dismissed many of the discourses on land current in reforming circles and concluded the tract with her solution: nationalisation of the land. Her stance is clearly socialist:

It follows that the land should be the common property of the nation as a whole... No individual should be able to lay down the conditions under which another may dwell or labour on the land of their common birth.²⁰²

This measure would give the people access to the land they needed for housing and work and would be the biggest advance in 'removing a fundamental source of inequality and a potent means of oppression and demoralisation.'²⁰³ The pamphlet, therefore, linked land nationalisation to the moral improvement of democracy. Land nationalisation thus held the key to ameliorating the conditions of the working class, with benefits for social, political, economic and moral life. It was hoped that such tracts would help build a working-class movement for reform. The organiser of one meeting at which Helen spoke in 1890 wrote to thank her for her attendance and for

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²⁰² *Ibid.*

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

the tracts she had sent to him.²⁰⁴ It is clear from her writing that, as in all her work, Helen combined her modern-day socialism with the earlier mid-century radical tradition of land as common to all and the morality of land reform.

Circumventing separate spheres through birth and wealth

As in her School Board work, Helen's privileged position as a woman of independent means with few family ties, following her upbringing and life with Mill, enabled her to circumvent the ideology which disapproved of women taking an active political role. She drew heavily on Mill's work in her public speeches and the audience would have listened intently, knowing she was the renowned philosopher's step-daughter. This gave her a power other women did not have.

Mill was the most respected thinker of his generation and Helen was part of a radical dynasty through her connection with him. This gave her standing in the land reform groups despite her sex. In speeches on land reform she would often begin by invoking the memory of her step-father; she would remind her audience that his last speech before his death had been on land and of his belief that no man should own land, as it was not man-made and everyone needed it to live. She would reiterate the common contemporary belief that it had been Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries and the granting of the church land to the aristocracy which had robbed the people of their land, for previously the land had been held in common for the use of all the people. She would continue by attacking contemporary landowners such as the Duke of Devonshire and repeating that the land belonged to the people who had

²⁰⁴ B. Firmin to Helen Taylor, 8 April 1890, MTC, vol. 17, no. 80.

been born on it, often taking the opportunity to mention her support for Ireland or the woman question.²⁰⁵

Helen's relationship with Mill, therefore, gave her the ear of the common man and women and the middle classes alike but it also gave her access to those in the land movement who had worked with Mill, e.g. Russel Wallace and A.C. Swinton, who welcomed Helen as one of their own. In addition it gave her access to the leading political theorist on land, Henry George, through his admiration of her step-father. Helen would have been aware of the economic philosophy of Henry George following the exchange of letters between himself and John Stuart Mill in 1869. George had written to Mill enclosing his article on how Chinese immigration to California had resulted in a decline in wages and capital, basing his premise on Mill's *Political Economy*.²⁰⁶ Mill had replied, praising the article and its author.²⁰⁷ Following the George family's arrival in Dublin in October 1881 to cover the Land War for the *Irish World*, Helen wrote to Mrs George, inviting the family to stay with her when they came over in London.²⁰⁸ Henry George intended to come to England to promote his land theories and Helen's offer to stay at her home indefinitely gave him the opportunity to do so.

George stayed with Helen during Christmas 1881 and into the New Year; his wife and children remained as her guests throughout the spring of 1882 after George

²⁰⁵ *Hampshire Telegraph*, 30 April 1887.

²⁰⁶ Henry George to John Stuart Mill, 22 August 1869, MTC, file 1, no. 138. See also Henry George jnr., *The Life of Henry George*, p. 196.

²⁰⁷ Draft reply from John Stuart Mill to Henry George, 23 October 1869, MTC, file 1, no. 333.

²⁰⁸ Helen Taylor to Mrs Annie George, 20 December 1881, MTC, file 20, no. 265.

returned to Ireland.²⁰⁹ A warm friendship ensued which continued until George's death in 1897, with letters passing between them during all these years. This negates the picture of Helen in the historiography as a bitter and difficult, hard-to-like personality who cut herself off from social contact. This privileged acquaintance with the powerful movers and shakers of Victorian society, gained from her upbringing, gave her power in the land reform organisations and allowed her to negotiate separate spheres. It was without doubt Helen who introduced George to the leading British land reformers and to Hyndman of the Democratic Federation, thus bringing him into the heart of the British reform movement. During his stay with Helen in 1882 George gave his first London speech under the auspices of the Land Nationalisation Society.²¹⁰

Likewise, it was Helen who introduced Michael Davitt to British land reformers and facilitated his involvement in the land campaigns of the 1880s. When the land agitation ended in Ireland Davitt was side-lined by the Irish parliamentary party as a result of his opposition to peasant propriety. He had read George's *Progress and Poverty* in prison and the pamphlet *The Irish Land Question* which George wrote as an appeal to the Land Leaguers to reject peasant proprietorship, for 'it would not improve the condition of the masses of the people.'²¹¹ George had claimed that 'the only true and just solution of the problem, the only end worth aiming at, is to make *all* the land the common property of *all* the people.'²¹² He had urged the Irish peasants and the British working class to unite in a common cause and spread the

²⁰⁹ The letters between the Georges during this time show Mrs George to have been living at Helen's address in London.

²¹⁰ Lawrence, *Henry George in the British Isles*, p. 24.

²¹¹ Henry George, *The Irish Land Question*, (London, 1881), p. 17.

²¹² *Ibid*, p. 31.

agitation to Great Britain, in order that the land should be won for the masses.²¹³

Davitt became a disciple of George; after his release from prison, and in the face of bitter opposition from Charles Parnell and the parliamentary party, he declared himself a Land Nationaliser.²¹⁴ His request to Parnell for £500 to spread the ideas in George's *Progress and Poverty* throughout the British Isles was, unsurprisingly, refused.²¹⁵ The parliamentarians did not like what they regarded as the extremism of George or the Irish-American newspaper, the *Irish World* which employed him and so Davitt went to America in July 1882 to raise money to be used for promoting land nationalisation throughout Britain.²¹⁶

Before leaving for the USA Davitt began agitating on land in Britain. On 27 May 1882, shortly after his release from prison, he shared a platform at a land meeting with George at Manchester Town Hall and in June he moved on to the Highlands and Liverpool, where on 10 June he spoke on 'the Land for the People.'²¹⁷ It would be Helen's influence which would enable him to become involved with the Land Nationalisation Society and bring him into the fold of the British land reform movement. In June 1882, during Davitt's tour of Britain, Helen recommended him to the Land Nationalisation Society. This received a favourable response and it was to be a long collaboration. For Davitt appears as late as 1900 on the letterhead of the organisation as a vice president. The letter Helen received from A.C. Swinton in response to her support for Davitt's involvement demonstrated that she had sufficient influence to introduce this ex Fenian, gun-running, former convict to a

²¹³ *Ibid*, p. 33.

²¹⁴ Davitt's speech in Liverpool, *The Nation*, 10 June 1882.

²¹⁵ Henry George to Mr Shaw, 30 May 1882, HGGC.

²¹⁶ Henry George to Annie George, 30 May 1882, HGGC.

²¹⁷ *The Nation*, 27 May 1882 and 3 June 1882.

British radical organisation. Swinton wrote that he would recommend collaboration with Davitt to the President, Alfred Russel Wallace,

...though my public association with him [*Davitt*] would not a little startle my relations...I shall be glad to submit your proposal to him [*Wallace*] with my full sympathy and at any rate you may rely upon my doing everything I consistently can to promote Land Nationalisation under so admirable a leader as Mr Davitt.²¹⁸

So the two men who were to be the leading land reformers of the 1880s in Britain were incorporated into the British land reform movement through the influence of Helen Taylor. Certainly she was instrumental in spreading Georgeite land theories by introducing George to such a platform. By October 1882 12,000 copies of *Poverty and Progress* had been sold in Britain and a new edition of 20,000 had to be printed.²¹⁹ Furthermore, through the introductions Helen was able to make for him, she enabled Davitt to continue and develop his land agitation campaigns after the demise of the Land League. Evidence, indeed, of her standing in the land reforming circles of 1880s Britain.

Helen was also able to circumvent the separate spheres ideology and be influential in the land reforming organisations because they depended on her money. This gave her political agency as she could strongly influence policy. Whereas in her School Board work patriarchal attitudes and gendered practices hindered her work and agency, in the world of these land reforming groups, ever needful for finance for their survival, such patriarchy could not hold sway. Simply put, they needed her financially in order to exist; holding the purse strings, she made strict demands on how the money should be spent. If she was not happy she simply refused to give these organisations or the individuals within them the money on which their existence depended. She made regular subscriptions, donations and one-off

²¹⁸ A.C. Swinton to Helen Taylor, 14 June 1882, MTC, file 17 no. 119.

²¹⁹ Henry George to T.E. Walker of the Land Nationalisation Society, 1 October 1882, HGGC.

payments to the land reform groups throughout her life. Her step-father had left £500 to the Land Tenure Reform Association in his will and Helen had been the major beneficiary.²²⁰ Her financial support of the Land Nationalisation Society and the Land Restoration League cannot be overstated. She was frequently thanked for it by their secretaries, Hyder of the Land Nationalisation Society and Vereinder of the Land Restoration League.

As late as 1900 Hyder wrote thanking her for her ‘extremely liberal subscription last June.’²²¹ In 1893 she heard that Mr Knight needed employment within the Land Nationalisation Society and offered to pay his salary for one year as an organising agent. She had strictures on how her money should be used. He should be appointed for one year, only as an organiser, for she doubted his ability to be able to be of service in a higher position. She also demanded that he resign from the executive as no salaried person should be able to vote for fear of corruption.²²² When Knight did not apply for the post the executive asked Helen if she would fund a Mr Aldridge instead. Helen was incensed at the liberty taken with her offer. For Mr Aldridge had a family: Helen had only offered to fund the post for one year and felt he was putting his family financially at risk by leaving permanent work to accept this temporary appointment.²²³ This correspondence also shows how she had been supporting the cost of the journal *Land and Labour*. Moberley asked Helen her financial intent over *Land and Labour*, beginning, ‘Hitherto you have most kindly paid the excess of cost over returns,’ before enquiring whether she could guarantee the society against any future deficit. Helen was wary of this and refused:

²²⁰ Will of John Stuart Mill, The Online Library of Liberty.

²²¹ Joseph Hyder to Helen Taylor, 5 October 1900, MTC, file 17, no. 96.

²²² Helen Taylor to Mr Moberley, December 1893, MTC, file 17, no. 11.

²²³ Mr Moberley to Helen Taylor, 8 May 1894, MTC, file 17, no. 112 and Helen Taylor to Mr Moberley, 17 May 1894, MTC, file 17, no. 113.

Then as to my guaranteeing all future deficit on 'Land and Labour' I do not see my way to do at all, least of all with some fresh scheme respecting it in view, of the nature of which I know nothing. I never at any time thought of undertaking to guarantee the expenses of 'Land and Labour' however it might be conducted or whatever might be the expense.²²⁴

The prestige and power Helen had within the society is shown in Moberley's reply to this refusal. He was abjectly apologetic and well aware of the financial debt that the journal owed to Helen:

I am fully aware that you never undertook to guarantee the expenses of 'Land and Labour' and no one is more sensible than myself of the generous way you have helped the society not only in connection with the paper but in many other ways as well. It has always been our wish to depend as little as possible upon large donations, such as you and some others have kindly given.²²⁵

In 1897 T.E. Walker wrote to draw her attention to the financial plight of the English Land Restoration League. Its leading lights, Saunders, Burroughs and Hutchinson, had died and this had caused the closure of the £1,000 year van fund:

These facts coupled with the withdrawal of Mr Moxham (who had promised large support) partly I believe on account of our admitting the Socialist element, all have made it impossible for the league to cut its coat according to its rapidly diminishing cloth, and as a result, there is now owing to the hard working, poor secretary, F Vereinder about £150.²²⁶

It had been suggested that the Land Restoration League approach Helen for help. A letter from E. Pan Jones, the Welsh land reformer, to Gwyneth Vaughan on the lack of funds for the propaganda van was forwarded to Helen and indicated her past financial generosity:

I am sorry to find that the van is locked up in your yard for the want of funds. What a pity, the wealthy people in Wales are Tories especially on the land question. Mr Hyder, you say can do nothing to help, have you laid the case before Mr Swinton? Miss Helen Taylor I understand is not in the country, they were the most faithful supporters I have met.²²⁷

²²⁴ Helen Taylor to Mr Moberley, 17 May 1894, MTC, file 17, no. 113.

²²⁵ Mr Moberley to Helen Taylor, 25 May 1894, MTC, file 17, no. 114.

²²⁶ Mr Walker to Helen Taylor, 15 December 1897, MTC, file 17, no.143.

²²⁷ E Pan Jones to G Vaughan, 25 April 1900, MTC, file 17, no. 135.

Helen also gave personal loans to individual land reformers. Joseph Hyder, Secretary of the Land Nationalisation Society, wrote to her asking for a loan of £20 to be repaid at £1 a month for his sister.²²⁸ She appears to have granted this. Helen was, however, incensed when his sister and her husband asked her directly for money in 1898; she wrote a stiff letter to Mr and Mrs Hyder over the matter and advised them to take no further responsibility for his sister. She objected to the tone of the approach his sister and her husband had taken in their letter. ‘It resembled markedly in style a whole class of begging letter with which I am tolerably familiar.’²²⁹ She did, however, send £52 to his sister, ‘but it is the last I shall send.’ Without Helen the land movement and the individuals within it would have had difficulty in continuing. The patriarchal world of separate spheres could be partly dismantled by those who had the money to fund reforming organisations. Personal wealth and the social cachet of her relationship to Mill gave Helen a voice which she would otherwise have struggled to have and which was denied to other men and women of lesser social stature and material comfort.

Helen’s feminism and the land movement

Throughout these years of land campaigning Helen continued to speak regularly on women’s suffrage.²³⁰ Helen’s feminism, however, was not a separate issue. It remained an integral component of her politics. She often linked the land and the woman question when speaking. At the St James’ land meeting in November 1884 she emphasised this connection:

It was now time that the women should come to the men and say ‘stand up as men, and act as men’ not by fighting like brutes, but by reasoning and let them

²²⁸ J Hyder to Helen Taylor, 7 October 1893, MTC, file 17, no. 93.

²²⁹ Helen Taylor to Mr and Mrs Hyder, August 1898, MTC, file 17, no. 97.

²³⁰ For example, *Essex Standard*, 27 March 1886. She spoke at a women’s suffrage meeting in Clacton-on-Sea.

remember that what had been taken away from them by the sham pretence of the law, the reality of a just law could give back again. The audience caught up the contention of Miss Taylor that this was a women's question in so much as women had to care for the household, a sentiment that was warmly cheered.²³¹

At the 1885 Annual General Meeting of the English Land Restoration League Helen declared that: 'She sometimes fancied that if men had not usurped the government the wealthy might not have usurped the land.'²³²

Helen, as previously stated, believed that the inclusion of women in politics would morally improve society and she discussed this with other land reformers. Henry George wrote to her from Glasgow:

I find the people everywhere ready if there were leaders and this comes back, I think, to what you have said of the influence of women.²³³

During her election campaign in 1885 to be elected as the first woman MP George again made reference to the influence she had exerted on behalf of the rights of women within the groups she joined: 'It is only of late years and largely since I first met you that I have come to realise the importance of women taking their part in politics.'²³⁴ Davitt also was a believer in women's rights and suffrage.²³⁵ He and Helen had planned to set up *The Democrat*, a weekly newspaper for men and women which would include support for women's suffrage.²³⁶ The paper was finally launched without Helen, who seemingly had some reservations. These remain unknown other than that the people involved could not agree on policy.

²³¹ *The Democrat*, 22 November 1884.

²³² *Lancaster Gazette and General Advertiser*, 6 June 1885.

²³³ Henry George to Helen Taylor, 27 December 1884, MTC, file 17, no. 86.

²³⁴ Henry George to Helen Taylor, 17 September 1885, MTC, file 17, no. 88.

²³⁵ For Davitt's pro-feminist statements see Michael Davitt, *Jottings From Solitary*, ed. Carla King (Dublin 2003), p. 121 and *Life and Progress in Australasia*, (London, 1898), pp. 366-7.

²³⁶ Michael Davitt to Henry George, 11 October 1884, HGGC.

Helen's land reform work in Great Britain, however, was looked on by many of her fellow British feminists with the dislike that they had felt for her work in Ireland. Again, she was politically at loggerheads with many in the suffrage movement. Helen's socialism had long been a problem for some. The land question divided Helen from Millicent Fawcett as much as her support for the Irish Land League and Home Rule had. In December 1889, Mrs Fawcett delivered two lectures opposing land nationalisation for the university extension movement. *Land and Labour*, the paper of the Land Nationalisation Society, commenting on her lectures, declared that it was 'difficult to imagine the possibility of exhibiting greater ignorance on the subject than was manifest in these discourses.' Mrs Fawcett called land nationalisation 'folly or robbery' and had made the mistake of thinking that only agricultural land was to be nationalised. The paper concluded that 'if landlordism is to stand it must find a stronger advocate than Mrs Fawcett.'²³⁷ Helen's inability to work with many in the women's suffrage movement was again ideological. In fact every aspect of her political and social life caused friction with the cautious suffragists, who feared political extremism would be used by opponents to deem that women were unsuitable for the vote.

Helen's demands for political agency for women through an acceptance of sexual difference

It has been shown that in her speeches for the land reforming organisations Helen linked the land and the women question. At the second Annual General Meeting of the Land Restoration League in 1885 she put women at the centre of reform:

²³⁷ *Land and Labour*, December 1890.

She claimed for the people the restoration of all the value they had by their labour put in the land, and reminded the meeting that no small part of that labour was due directly or indirectly to women.²³⁸

On a separate occasion she returned to the theme that men's treatment of women was responsible for the loss of land, declaring that '... she sometimes thought that it would not have been stolen from them if the men had not in the first instance denied equal rights to women.'²³⁹

Helen used the language of separate spheres to call women to political action. As has been demonstrated, like most feminists of her generation she believed that men and women were inherently different. Helen never doubted that women were morally superior and her feminism never challenged this social construct. So she called on women to be active in reform as an extension of their family duties as wives and mothers. In a tract published for the English Land Restoration League in 1890 she directly linked women and the land question with an appeal to women to become involved. Entitled *The Restoration of their Homes to the People, An Appeal to Women*, this publication put forward the view that women's duties in the home, as advocated by society, must morally be extended to include an interest in the laws which affected the well-being of the family and the homes they lived in. The ability of the family to have a decent home near the male breadwinner's place of work at a fair rent was within a woman's sphere of influence, Helen claimed.²⁴⁰ Whilst public and private morality of society should be the first concern of women in their political work, the well-being of the family was the second. Women should inform themselves politically and should oppose the hereditary House of Lords and

²³⁸ *The Standard*, 30 May 1885.

²³⁹ *Lancashire Evening Post*, press cutting, 21 October 1886, MTC, box 7.

²⁴⁰ Helen Taylor, *The Restoration of their Homes to the People. An Appeal to Women*, English Land Restoration League Tracts – No. 17, L.S.E. Selected Pamphlets, 1890, L.S.E. Library, p. 1. URL:<http://www.jstor.org/stable/60214923>.

Conservative legislation which favoured hereditary privilege.²⁴¹ It was necessary for women, Helen argued, to have an understanding of how the land had been stolen from the people in order to care properly for their families. She called for the land boards, which were being advocated by reform organisations to administer the land, to include women members:

In the days when the foundations of our national liberties were laid, men and women met together at the annual assemblies which were afterwards consolidated into the House of Commons. Probably had women never been deprived of or neglected to claim their ancient right to sit in the original Parliament of the country, the nation would not so easily have been deprived, either by open violence or insidious fraud, of their right to the land of their fathers. For it seems in human nature that the women should take the deepest interest in the home and be its most watchful guardians. It is time that the women of England should open their eyes to this matter; the poor that they themselves, their neighbours, and their children, may have safe, pleasant, and healthy homes to live in; the rich that they may do their duty to their poorer fellow-creatures in securing for them that haven of a peaceful home which is one of the first blessings of a civilised life.²⁴²

Thus Helen urged women to extend their interests into political life as an extension of their duties as women to protect the welfare of their loved ones. It was a moral duty that the ‘angel of the house’ should be engaged in land reform, for the well-being of their families depended on women educating themselves about the need for and working to achieve it.

Conclusion

This chapter has revealed the extent of Helen’s political agency in the land question of Victorian Britain and Ireland. It has argued that she was able to negotiate a social ideology which frowned on women’s involvement in the public realm through her connections and social status, though at times she used the language of separate spheres to argue that women’s sphere involved the land. It has evidenced her anti-

²⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 2.

²⁴² *Ibid*, pp.2 and 3.

imperial feminism, which led her to support Home Rule and champion the rights of the Irish peasant at a time when the Irish were depicted in British newspapers as an inferior race.²⁴³ Her wealth and generosity kept these reforming organisations in existence and gave her influence within them and her popularity with the working-class developed an audience and popular demand for land reform. Helen drew large audiences which also gave her leverage within the groups.

That the women who fought the land war in Ireland disappeared from the historiography and that Roy Douglas could write an entire book on the land question without referencing Helen once says much about the patriarchal nature of history writing before the women's history of the 1970s reinstated women's activism. Helen belonged to a community of women spanning back generations who had political agency but each generation was removed from the historiography. Why? I believe it is, as Dale Spender asserts, because of patriarchal attitudes which allow men to control knowledge and by which 'hundreds of women – often influential in their own time – have been made to disappear.'²⁴⁴ To write the history of the Victorian land movement without recalling the part played by women, not just the women radical leaders but also peasant women who took part in battles over land, to protect their homesteads, particularly in Ireland and Scotland, is to write an incomplete history and maintain the lie that history is the study of the deeds of great men. Helen Taylor's contribution to the land movement is testimony to how men and *women* worked together to transform society as members of some of the largest and most

²⁴³ Liz Curtis, *Nothing But the Same Old Story*, (London, 1984), pp. 55 – 56. Curtis illustrates her account of Victorian racism against the Irish with contemporary examples from the magazine *Punch*. These depict the Irish with simian features and depict them as violent and savage, in contrast to the civilised English.

²⁴⁴ Dale Spender, *Women of Ideas and what men have done to them*, (London, 1982), p. 13.

influential campaign groups of the Victorian era. This needs to be acknowledged if the historiography is to be balanced and complete.

5. The Social Democratic Federation and afterwards – socialism, liberalism and moral reform: promoting feminism and challenging separate spheres within the political and social organisations of the 1880s and 1890s`

This chapter will explore Helen's political campaigns as a member of the Democratic Federation (renamed the Social Democratic Federation in 1884) and her continuing involvement with liberal politics throughout the 1880s and 1890s. It will also examine her campaign to be elected as the first woman MP in 1885 and her membership of the Moral Reform Union, which evidenced her continuing adherence to the morality of mid-century liberalism even during her time in the Social Democratic Federation, the first Marxist political party in England. As in previous chapters the focus will be on Helen as a political player, how the organisations she joined were gendered and how she negotiated these gendered expectations through an examination of her relationship with male executive members of the Social Democratic Federation, in particular the misogynists Henry Hyndman and Ernest Balfort Bax.¹ It will again evidence that separate spheres, though a middle-class ideal, was successfully resisted by some financially independent women with the support of radical and socialist men and women, particularly from the working class. This is seen in the support for Helen among the predominately working-class electorate of Camberwell when she stood for Parliament.

After nearly a decade of antagonism between herself and the Liberal Party Helen returned to work closely with them, particularly after the Women's Liberal Association was created, for the promotion of women's rights was first and foremost her intent. She had argued with the Liberals over Ireland and their stance within the

¹ The misogyny of Hyndman and Bax will be evidenced in this chapter.

School Board but she never broke her links with liberalism. Throughout all these political and social involvements it will be seen how Helen's feminism remained integral to her policies, though it brought her into further conflict with the British suffrage movement. It remained antagonistic to some of her political causes, which they continued to believe would bring the campaign for votes for women into disrepute.

The Social Democratic Federation: Promoting feminism in a patriarchal organisation

The Democratic Federation was the most influential political group to emerge during the 1880s. Helen was a founding member of this party, which was renamed the Social Democratic Federation in 1884 after it adopted Marxism. On 15 March 1881 this new political group first met at the Westminster Palace Hotel, with the intention of promoting working-class interests. The meeting, arranged by Henry Hyndman, was presided over by Joseph Cowen, the Radical MP, and attended by Helen, who, as shown earlier, was already heavily involved in contemporary radical causes through her work at the School Board, in land reform and as a member of the Irish Land League. The aim of the conference was to unite all the radical clubs of London. At the time Hyndman knew very few of those present, Helen included.² He had not moved in radical circles, having been a Tory who had not converted to the radical cause until early in 1881; he did not become a socialist until 1884.

Following this initial meeting the Provisional Committee of the embryonic Democratic Federation held its inaugural meeting in London to agree on its programme on 7 June 1881, attended by trade societies, radical clubs, working-class

² Henry Hyndman, *Record of An Adventurous Life* (London, 1911), p. 246.

organisations and other campaigning groups, including the Land Nationalisation Society, all of which it hoped to unite within the new political party. As Helen was a member of every leading radical group, for example land reform organisations, Radical clubs and the Anti-Coercion Association, it was inevitable that she would be involved at the outset in this new organisation.

The provisional executive had suggested adopting manhood suffrage, triennial parliaments, equal electoral districts and the payment of members' salaries and election expenses by the rate payer. Clearly these were old Chartist rather than socialist concerns and, indeed, the press referred to the new organisation as 'The New Radical Movement'.³ Even the party's name recalled the Charter instead of reflecting the new Marxist social democracy which was gaining adherents in Europe.⁴ To the above long-standing radical causes had been added for discussion at this meeting adult suffrage, nationalisation of the land, abolition of the House of Lords, election bribery to be declared a felonious act and legal independence for Ireland.⁵ It has been well documented how the roots of this organisation lay in English radicalism rather than the German socialism of Marx, which it would later embrace. It did not, at first, demand that the state should own the means of production. Socialism was not mentioned by the speakers at its creation and although there were some socialist ideas in Hyndman's pamphlet *England For All*, which he distributed to all delegates, they were not discussed. When the conference

³ *Huddersfield Daily Chronicle*, 21 March 1881.

⁴ Hyndman wrote that the term 'social democrat' in the context of his party came not from Germany but was 'used by Bronterre O'Brien nearly fifty years ago, long before the influence of Marx or Engels' (Hyndman, *Record of An Adventurous Life*, p. 225). The Democratic Federation was renamed the Social Democratic Federation in 1884 after openly embracing Marxism, with its demand for workers to own their means of production. Hyndman insisted that this was not following the example of Marxists in Germany, who called themselves Social Democrats, but had its origins in the older English tradition of socialism.

⁵ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 2 May 1881.

drew up its constitution it resolved to campaign for land nationalisation and Irish Home Rule, which had not been in Hyndman's programme, so he reissued his pamphlet to include them.⁶ Hyndman had changed his position from being anti-Home Rule in 1880 to being on the executive of the Irish Land League in 1881, an organisation which many nationalists saw as a vehicle to achieve independence.⁷ The second edition of *England For All* also called for inheritance laws to be overhauled, the abolition of settlement and entail and the registration of land. Furthermore, local public bodies should be able to obtain land and rent it to those who had need of it, with compensation for landowners.⁸ Hyndman believed that state ownership would replace landlordism and that this should be linked with nationalisation of the railways.⁹

One of the first actions of the Federation, as discussed in the previous chapter, was to send a delegation, including Helen, to Ireland to report on the Land War and link up with the Land League. Helen's decision to join the Democratic Federation was a natural progression of her political activity. Historians have briefly acknowledged Helen's importance in the Democratic Federation, as outlined in the introduction to this thesis. She, like many others, moved from radicalism into the new socialism of the 1880s. The first members of the Democratic Federation were O'Brienites, for whom the landowning class were immoral because land was God-given.¹⁰ The Chartist James Bronterre O'Brien believed that when the Charter was finally

⁶ M.S. Wilkins, 'The non Socialist Origins of England's First Important Socialist Organisation,' *International Review of Social History*, vol. 4 (1959), p. 205.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 206.

⁸ Henry Hyndman, *England for All, The Text Book of Democracy* (London, 1881), p. 30.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 126.

¹⁰ Information on the O'Brienite influence within the Democratic Federation is taken from Mark Bevir, 'The British Social Democratic Federation 1880-85; from O'Brienism to Marxism', *International Review of Social History*, XXXV, 11, (92), pp. 207- 229.

adopted one of the first acts of the new parliament should be land nationalisation. O'Brien's followers had created the Land and Labour League in 1869, which folded when the land reform movement declined in the 1870s. O'Brienites remained active, joining the London radical clubs of the 1870s and through them becoming involved in the formation of the Democratic Federation. It was not until 1884 that the Federation embraced state ownership of the means of production and changed its name to the Social Democratic Federation, when, as the historian Mark Bevir has observed, 'the O'Brienites attached aspects of vulgar Marxism to their earlier beliefs.'¹¹

Helen was a pivotal influence in the formation of the Democratic Federation, despite her sex, due to her privileged position in radical circles; in this connection Sydney Webb's contemporary account linked her to Mill. According to Webb, the Federation had been founded in March 1881 'by the efforts of Mr Henry M Hyndman, Mr Herbert Burrows, Miss Helen Taylor (step-daughter of John Stuart Mill) and some others.'¹² Helen had joined an organisation formed first and foremost to oppose coercion, to unite those protesting at Gladstone's policy in Ireland, which English radicals regarded as despotic and anti-democratic.¹³

At the inaugural meeting in June 1881 Hyndman was elected as the chair and Helen lost no opportunity in gaining the support of those present to further women's rights. Herbert Burrows put forward a motion in favour of adult suffrage, with Helen as his seconder, supported by Miss Downing. Urging its adoption, Helen '... felt

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

¹² Sydney Webb, *Socialism in England*, American Economic Association, vol. 4, no. 2, April 1889, pp. 7-73, p. 10.

¹³ Henry Lee's introduction to the 1912 edition (London), of Henry Hyndman and William Morris, *A Summary of the Principles of Socialism* (London 1883).

confident that there was scarcely a man present who would not as a matter of abstract right admit that women had a right to political representation (cheers).'¹⁴ Not all delegates supported women's voting rights and a vigorous debate took place. One attendee, Mr Matthias, declared that 'delegates had not been sent here to discuss women's suffrage.'¹⁵

The Social Democratic Federation has been seen by some historians as misogynist but others have pointed out that the woman question was left as a matter for individual conscience.¹⁶ Certainly the organisation was working within the confines of traditional Victorian attitudes to women in not including gender equality in its constitution at its creation, whereas Helen had been battling for it on the School Board for the last five years. The Federation members would have been aware that the French Workers' Party, Parti Ouvrier Français, had passed a resolution calling for sexual equality at its inaugural conference in 1879.¹⁷ Accordingly women's position in the party and universal suffrage itself had to be negotiated and contested within the Federation. It was not only Helen's money and social independence which gave her power in the organisation but also her popularity amongst the working class and her membership of the London School Board. Helen's high public profile and the respect given to her as Mill's step-daughter gave her the power in the Democratic Federation to promote women's rights, though not without opposition.¹⁸

¹⁴ *Freeman's Journal*, 9 June 1881 and *Pall Mall Gazette*, 9 June 1881.

¹⁵ *Manchester Times*, 11 June 1881.

¹⁶ See Karen Hunt *Equivocal Feminists: The Social Democratic Federation and the Women Question 1884- 1911*, (Cambridge, 1996), p. 40. See chapter one for an assessment of this book in relation to Helen in the historiography.

¹⁷ Marilyn J Boxer 'Socialism Faces Feminism. The failure of Synthesis in France 1879-1919,' Marilyn J Boxer & Jean H Quataert, eds., *Socialist Women: European Socialist Feminism in the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries*, (New York, 1978), chapter 4, p. 77.

¹⁸ Sheila Rowbotham, among others, has documented the fact that women's involvement in socialist politics at this time was generally restricted to those having no family demands. 'The nationally known figures tended to be middle class educated women, and they were invariably single, or, most

Most of Helen's public speeches, whether in the School Board Committee Room, during land campaigns or concerning Ireland, contained references to the necessity of women taking an equal role in society. Hyndman's opposition to women's suffrage would have driven a wedge between them as would his lack of support for employment opportunities for women. He believed that working women brought down men's wages.¹⁹ The suffragette Silvia Pankhurst recalled:

Moreover Hyndman, Belfort Bax and others of its prominent committee men, were opposed to women's enfranchisement. I remember, many years later, as a young girl, entering on Votes for Women propaganda, in London, encountering Hyndman at the house of Dora Monte Fiore. 'Women should learn to have influence as they have in France instead of trying to get votes,' Hyndman shouted at me, in a fierce tirade.²⁰

Although he opposed women's suffrage, Hyndman's letters to Helen show respect for her abilities, no doubt partly because of the wealth she had inherited from Mill. It has previously been noted that this allowed her to bank roll the organisations she joined. Hyndman would also have been keen to have Helen involved in the party because of the working-class support for her school board and land reform work and her social standing as the step-daughter of Mill. Hyndman became increasingly frustrated at the time she spent on the School Board when she might have been working for socialism. He called on her publicly a number of times in *Justice*, the paper of the Social Democratic Federation, to leave the School Board: 'We have always regretted the amount of work given by a woman of Miss Taylor's capacity to school board work.'²¹ After she had split from the Social Democratic Federation he called on her again 'to leave school board work and work for free education and

significantly childless.' (Rowbotham's Introduction to Olga Meier and Faith Evans, ed., *The Daughters of Karl Marx: Family Correspondence – 1866-1898* (New York, 1982), p. xvii).

¹⁹ *Justice*, 15 March 1884.

²⁰ E. Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement* (London, 1932), p. 111.

²¹ *Justice*, 12 April 1884.

meals on a wider basis.’²² Hyndman envisaged her playing a central role in the Federation as a member of its Executive. He wrote to her in 1883, ‘I should much like to talk with you seriously about the future of the Federation.’²³ It is certain, however, that Hyndman’s racism and jingoism would not have endeared him to Helen’s anti-imperial feminism. Helen, as previously recorded, had an international outlook and had been lauded by Anna Parnell for her pro-Irish view of the Irish question.²⁴ In contrast, Hyndman believed in the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race and declared: ‘It is absurd, of course, to deny the influence of race and climate: none would contend that a Saxon and an Irishman have the same qualities.’²⁵ Helen did. The surprise is not that Helen and Hyndman argued in 1884 but that it took so long before her patience ran out. They came from totally different political traditions, Hyndman a jingoistic ex Tory and Helen with her radical women’s rights heritage from her mother and step-father.

Ernest Belfort Bax, Helen’s executive colleague on the Democratic Federation, was himself an out-and-out misogynist and there was no love lost between the two. Hyndman gave Helen respect as a member of the Federation’s Executive, whereas Bax, in his memoirs, fails to record Helen’s contribution to the formation and early years of the Social Democratic Federation, reducing her to:

One of the early members...Of a thin, spare figure, her self-conceit was unabounded. She had a lofty smugness about her which had to be seen to be appreciated.....a preposterous creature with her airs and pseudo dignity.²⁶

²² *Justice*, 8 July 1885.

²³ Henry Hyndman to Helen Taylor, 9 June 1883, MTC, file 18, no. 54

²⁴ Anna Parnell to Helen Taylor, 5 November 1885, MTC, file 8, no. 76

²⁵ Hyndman, *England for All. The Text Book for Democracy*, (London, 1881), p.116.

²⁶ E Belfort Bax *Reminiscences and Reflections of a Mid and Late Victorian 1918*, (London, 1918), p. 110.

Bax was jealous of the respect which other members of the Executive afforded her, some rising from their seats when she entered the room. This enraged him and he openly tried to stop this habit.²⁷ One can only imagine, from reading of Helen's dealings with those who would dismiss women on the School Board, what executive meetings of the Democratic Federation would have been like. Helen would not have endured such sexism meekly. Certainly Helen could have felt nothing but antipathy towards Bax and would have let him know, so his tirade against her was unsurprising, though, in a belittling, sexist manner, it was aimed at her physical appearance and demeanour rather than her political ideas. Bax was opposed to the growing women's rights movement and later wrote a book vehemently opposing the feminist movement, *The Fraud of Feminism*. In this he attacked what he termed the political and social feminists of his day, reiterating a current Victorian pseudo-scientific belief that women's smaller brains gave them less intelligence than men, and dwelling on their alleged tendency to hysteria.²⁸ He also believed that the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, which had raised the age of consent for girls from thirteen to sixteen and strengthened the law against brothels, especially the abduction of young girls into them, had resulted in 'a crusade against men.'²⁹

Despite promoting feminist ideals in the organisation, especially women's suffrage, Helen's involvement with the Democratic Federation did not endear her to many within the women's suffrage movement. Many of its members despaired at the damage she was doing to the cause through her active political involvement with Irish nationalists, and her political radicalism on the School Board cited previously. In 1881 Helen sent forty marks (which today would have a value of £165) to the

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ E Belfort Bax, *The Fraud of Feminism*, (London, 1913), pp. 31 and 51.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.65.

family of persecuted socialists in Germany by way of Eleanor Marx, who wrote on sending it that Helen 'is much interested in our German movement' and that her interest should be acknowledged in the *Social Democrat*.³⁰ Helen's feminism was always political, as opposed to the philanthropic feminism endorsed by her fellow British feminists Josephine Butler, Frances Power Cobbe and Lydia Becker, whose feminism 'attempted to build on the adulation of female self-sacrifice rather than attempt to challenge it.'³¹ Middle-class philanthropy was regularly attacked in the columns of *Justice*, in particular the good works of Octavia Hill, whom it belittled for 'her bitter middle class prejudices.'³² Cobbe was a Conservative and Butler a supporter of Gladstone, despite his opposition to women's suffrage.³³ Helen's membership of a revolutionary Marxist organisation, supporting workers regardless of nationality, would have added to concerns about her within the women's movement. Helen did embrace Marxism for a time, though she could never condone class warfare or violence and always firmly believed that the dream of a Socialist Republic should be achieved peacefully:

She was in favour of a republic but did not approve of anything other than peaceful means. She strongly disapproved of the use of rifles whether in the hands of monarchists or republicans.³⁴

Helen was labelled in the press as a 'red republican theorist'³⁵ because of her unsuccessful support to have a demand for a Republic added to the party's manifesto.³⁶ Interestingly, while it has been noted earlier that Mill and Helen had split the early suffrage movement through, amongst other things, their insistence on

³⁰ Eleanor Marx to Karl Kautsky, the Czech Marxist philosopher and activist, 7 October 1881, Eleanor Marx Papers, Institute of Social History, Amsterdam. Thanks to Eva Rosenhaft for the information that 40 marks was worth £2 in 1881.

³¹ Barbara Caine, *Victorian Feminists* (Oxford 1996), p. 107.

³² *Justice*, 29 March 1884 and on at least one other occasion.

³³ Caine, *Victorian Feminists*, p. 125.

³⁴ *Freeman's Journal*, 2 June 1882.

³⁵ *Ipswich Chronicle*, 29 November 1884.

³⁶ *Freeman's Journal*, 2 June 1882.

women-only committees, Helen's feminism had evolved by the 1880s, as a result of her experience of public life, into a belief that men and women should work side by side in organisations rather than separately. She opposed setting up a separate women's committee in the Federation:

The time is gone by for Ladies' Committees separate for public work. That is one thing at least we learn on the School Board where men and women work together on public official business and I doubt whether you will find it more easy to induce women to work on a Committee of their own.³⁷

Helen did, however, set up with Olive Schreiner, in 1884, a women's group in the Social Democratic Federation:

Why 28 years ago I was one of the eight women, with Helen Taylor in the chair, John Stuart Mill's niece, who started in a small underground room near the Houses of Parliament, the Woman's branch of the Democratic Foundation – the largest socialist organization in England.³⁸

In 1883 the Democratic Federation published its Marxist manifesto, *Socialism Made Plain*. Signed by the entire executive including Helen, it demanded adult suffrage, nationalisation of the land, free compulsory education, an eight hour day and cumulative taxes, all of which had long been radical concerns, but it also called for the workers to own the means of production. It declared: 'All wealth is due to labour; therefore to the labourers all wealth is due'. This was too much for many radicals who had joined the party as a protest over Coercion and the organisation lost many of its members when it became overtly socialist.³⁹ Its actual membership had always been much smaller than its influence. Although Engels over-estimated that in the first ten years 100,000 people had taken up membership,⁴⁰ it has been estimated that in the early 1880s, when Helen was involved, membership stood at

³⁷ Draft letter from Helen Taylor to Henry Hyndman, undated, MTC, file 18, no.33.

³⁸ Olive Schreiner to William Philip Schreiner, 21 April 1912, which dates the event as 1884. BC16/Box5/Fold1/1912/14, *Olive Schreiner Letters*, Online, <http://www.oliveschreiner.org>.

³⁹ Lee writing in the 1912 introduction to Hyndman and Morris, *A Summary of the Principles of Socialism*.

⁴⁰ Figure quoted by Martin Crick in *The History of the Democratic Federation*, (Keele, 1994), p. 61.

under 600, with less than a hundred living outside the capital, though many others were brought to the fringes of the movement and attended meetings.⁴¹

Helen stayed within the new organisation for the time being, which is proof that she was happy for it to embrace Marxism. What would convince her to leave in summer 1884 was Hyndman's dictatorial running of the party. Many others in the movement had also become disillusioned with Hyndman's autocratic control of policy and day-to-day administration. Eleanor Marx wrote to her sister Laura in July, foreseeing the coming split in the party:

Hyndman has also succeeded in getting poor old Bax turned out of Today,⁴² for Champion, who takes Bax's place, is just a tool of H's
So far he [H] has things here much his own way, but he is playing his cards very badly – irritating everyone and his little game will soon be played out.⁴³

At this point Helen's patience ran out. In July 1884 Hyndman wrote to Helen, berating her that she should

...waste her time, energy and money on what you know, as well as I do, are mere trifling movements when the great cause of Socialism in England called for all and more than all that you could do in every way. I have heard you say that Socialism, organised international Socialism, could alone really benefit the workers.⁴⁴

Helen was no longer on the executive of the SDF by 1884, probably, at least in part, due to her having no time to give.⁴⁵ She threw herself into tours with Henry George and other leading land reformers and land seems to have been her major concern.

⁴¹ P.A. Watmough, 'Membership of the Social Democratic Federation 1885-1902,' *Bulletin - Labour History*, vol. 34 (1977), pp. 345-40, p. 38.

⁴² A newspaper of the SDF.

⁴³ Letter from Eleanor Marx to Laura 21 July 1884 published in Meier and Evans (eds), *The Daughters of Karl Marx: Family Correspondence – 1866-1898*, p. 179.

⁴⁴ Henry Hyndman to Helen Taylor, 25 July, 1881, MTC, file 18, no. 32

⁴⁵ Yvonne Knapp recounts that only three women were on the executive of the SDF in 1884: Eleanor Marx, Mrs Hyndman and Mrs Hicks. (Yvonne Knapp, *Eleanor Marx: The Crowded Years*, vol. 2 (London, 1976), p. 12.

Herbert Burrows had arranged for Helen, on behalf of the Social Democratic Federation, to attend a number of meetings of the striking Staffordshire miners, who had had their pay cut, as mentioned earlier.⁴⁶ She used the opportunity to raise awareness of the land question rather than Marxist economics. At one meeting of the strikers she spoke on the land question for nearly an hour, ‘touching only slightly on the wages question.’⁴⁷ Hyndman would undoubtedly have found her hard to control and exasperating because of her adherence to the ‘trifling movements’ he had complained about in their correspondence. She remained quintessentially an old-fashioned English socialist and her political concerns remained those of her step-father: land, liberty, education and the amelioration of democracy through parliamentary reform and universal suffrage.

Hyndman’s letter to Helen demanded that she concentrate her energies on the Federation instead of pleading ‘some trifling pretext or another from taking your proper share of the very heavy workload before us’ and he continued that ‘...I have no hesitation in telling you that it is your duty (sic) to work with us and to help us in every way you can.’⁴⁸ Helen wrote an incensed reply, calling his letter ‘hopelessly arrogant’ and saying he was beyond arguing with. Helen was on the staff of *Justice*, the Democratic Federation newspaper,⁴⁹ but she had become angry at Hyndman’s editorship. She accused him, in her reply to this letter, of running the paper along the lines of the worst excesses of the capitalist press, by attacking individuals in articles without adding his name to them. Such secrecy she could not tolerate and

⁴⁶ Herbert Burrows to Henry Hyndman, 11 August 1884, LSE Coll Misc 522 Democratic Federation.

⁴⁷ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 14 August 1884.

⁴⁸ Henry Hyndman to Helen Taylor, 25 July 1884, MTC, file 18, no. 25.

⁴⁹ Hyndman, *The Record of An Adventurous Life*, p. 331.

she reminded him of her right to criticise him, as she had a wider experience of public life and had 'been longer a socialist'⁵⁰:

If you are a socialist you have no right to say in print what you dare not put your name to...no excuse for hiding personal insult of people you don't like, under the veil of anonymous writing.⁵¹

The split of the executive into the Social Democratic Federation and the anti-parliamentarian Socialist League was only three months away but tensions were at breaking point that autumn. At the end of the year, when she had left to join the Socialist League, Eleanor Marx wrote to her sister Laura a letter which clarifies the reasons for Helen's anger against Hyndman at this time:

Apart from the disgraceful vilification of everyone to whom he personally objected as not being 'followers' of himself, Hyndman forced things to such a condition that it was impossible to go on working with him.⁵²

Helen wrote to Hyndman that he had no right to talk to her about her duty in the arrogant way which he had. She reminded him that she had sacrificed her standing in society for her socialism:

With regard to 'Justice' I must say in reply to your letter that you are conducting it in a manner to make it an engine of public demoralization. It is spreading the vile morality of the capitalist press ...and accustoming its leaders to the unmanly and cowardly habit of anonymous insult and irresponsible assertion.⁵³

Shortly afterwards Helen parted ways with the Social Democratic Federation.

George Bernard Shaw in a letter to Andreas Scheu informed him, in the autumn of 1884, that 'Helen Taylor has taken herself off to run a halfpenny paper with the Georgeites', thus indicating that her formal involvement with the party had

⁵⁰ Helen Taylor to Henry Hyndman, undated draft, MTC, file 18, no. 27

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Eleanor Marx to Laura Lafargue, 31 December 1884, cited in Meier and Evans (eds.), *The Daughters of Karl Marx: Family Correspondence – 1866-1898*, p. 179.

⁵³ Helen Taylor to Henry Hyndman, undated draft, MTC, file 18, no. 30.

finished.⁵⁴ Helen supported the three Social Democratic Federation candidates in the November 1885 General Election⁵⁵ and gave a printing press to *Justice* that same year when it was in debt to The Modern Press.⁵⁶

Meanwhile the Social Democratic Federation had split at the end of 1884 into those who believed in the parliamentary way to socialism, who remained in the party with Hyndman, and the revolutionaries of the Socialist League. The latter included Eleanor Marx, Edward Aveling, William Morris and Ernest Belfort Bax. The language of violent revolution would have had no appeal to Helen, and, as she found Hyndman intolerable, there was no place for her in either organisation. She returned, like many had earlier when the Federation had embraced socialism, to her radical liberal roots, working with the National Liberal League and the Women's Liberal Association to secure democratic rights for all regardless of sex. Her work with the Liberals, and why she could again work with them after all the animosity between herself and the Liberal Party over Ireland, the School Board and the Camberwell election campaign cited below, will be examined later in this chapter. Before looking at her relationship with the Liberals during the latter half of the 1880s and into the 1890s this chapter will turn now to her campaign to be elected as the first woman in the House of Commons as the member for Camberwell. This is an illustration of her bringing her radical feminism into active politics regardless of what antagonisms it might bring from the official Liberal Party and from many within the women's suffrage movement.

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⁵⁴ George Bernard Shaw to Andreas Scheu, A. *Scheu Papers*, Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.

⁵⁵ See later in this chapter.

⁵⁶ H.W. Lee and E. Archbold, *Social Democracy in Britain* (London, 1935), p. 94. Lee was a SDF member.

The Camberwell Election 1885: the challenge to separate spheres

As early as 1878 it had been rumoured in the English press that Helen was to attempt to stand as a candidate in Southwark at the next General Election.⁵⁷ Helen had denied this and it was not until the late spring of 1885 that the Committee of Camberwell Radical Club approached her with the offer of being their Independent Radical Democrat candidate in the forthcoming General Election in November.⁵⁸ This was just after her split with Hyndman's party. Helen was well known and popular amongst the working-class electorate of the borough. She had been on the London School Board for the previous nine years as the member for neighbouring Southwark and was also known to the Irish of that part of London as a staunch supporter of Home Rule, the Land War and Land Nationalisation.

Mr C. Ammon, the Secretary of Camberwell Radical Club, in inviting her to stand, declared publicly that there was no statutory law against such a move. The 1832 Reform Act had merely made it illegal for women to vote, he believed; it did not forbid them from standing as candidates. Helen accepted the nomination but insisted that if a working man should come forward as a candidate she would step down and let him take her place.⁵⁹ Her even being able to put her name forward was a further example of how she was able to negotiate the ideology of separate spheres for men and women through her privileged liberal upbringing and her political connections. Her decision to stand as the candidate divided public opinion. The women's suffrage movement was split on Helen's candidature and this direct challenge to the inferior position of women in society. The *English Women's Review*, though recognising that it showed growing support by men for full political participation for women,

⁵⁷ *Gloucester Citizen*, 9 April 1878 and *English Women's Review*, September 1878.

⁵⁸ Camberwell Radical Club to Helen Taylor, 22 May 1885, MTC, file 18, no. 5.

⁵⁹ *English Women's Review*, June 1885.

doubted that it would further the cause of women's suffrage. Rather it showed, the periodical claimed, that 'men shall be allowed to appoint what candidate they choose whoever that candidate might be.'⁶⁰ Helen received a letter, signed 'AAW',⁶¹ which expressed a fear that her candidature and the press coverage of it would 'do much to injure the prospects of the Women's Suffrage Bill' which was due its second reading in the House of Commons. It would have been far better, the correspondent pleaded to Helen, to wait for the successful passing of the bill and then present herself as a candidate, for 'we feel anxious about any step that will endanger it.'⁶² Many Liberals were incensed that Helen was standing against the official Liberal candidate, R J Strong, and it was feared that she would hand victory to the Tory candidate. 'After all,' wrote one newspaper columnist, alluding to Helen's long-running battles with the official Liberals over Ireland and within the School Board, 'the stoutest Liberal would probably prefer to see Mr Blunt [*the Tory candidate*] rather than Miss Taylor in the House of Commons.'⁶³

In general, the British press regarded her campaign as, at the very least, eccentric, if not downright bizarre and self-obsessed. Whilst Helen's supporters saw her as offering a serious resistance and challenge to the social status quo, the press remained unmoved. *The Saturday Review* had been totally dismissive when the 1878 rumour of her standing had circulated:

A woman is not like a male alien, a person who is disqualified, but for electoral purposes she is non-existent... That the majority of voters of Southwark would

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Mostly likely this is Alice Westlake, Helen's School Board colleague.

⁶² AAW to Helen Taylor, 14 June 1885, MTC, file 13, no. 361. The signature is unclear and has been catalogued as 'AAW' when it is most likely 'AHW' which would indicate the writer was Alice Hare Westlake.

⁶³ *Sheffield Independent*, 24 October 1885.

rather return Miss Taylor than a man is beyond belief... The return of Miss Taylor would be merely a freak of one queerly disposed constituency.⁶⁴

Whilst dismissing her campaign in 1885, the press also acknowledged the support for her candidature amongst the working class:

That the great majority of the Radical working men will support her need hardly be doubted. On the other hand there is a section of Liberal less advanced, and perhaps more fastidious, who may decline to sanction so startling an innovation, to say nothing of their dread of a politician of the most extreme type... The world outside the United Kingdom sets us down as a people of eccentricities, and surely there will be abundant scope for wit at our expense as soon as we shall have a Legislature of mixed sexes... The House of Commons is not a place for the softer sex.⁶⁵

Although many Liberals were incensed at what they saw as this 'wilful woman' who would divide the Liberal vote, and demanded she withdraw,⁶⁶ others came out in support of her. Portsmouth Radical Club sent their congratulations on her candidature, declaring 'that it will be a great step in the future struggle for the equal rights of women.'⁶⁷ Helen received and also gave support to her erstwhile Social Democratic Federation colleagues, three of whom were standing in the 1885 election as SDF candidates. W.B. Parker, who had been a founder member of the Democratic Federation with Helen and who was standing as the Social Democratic Labour candidate for Central Hackney, spoke in support of her candidature at one election meeting in Camberwell.⁶⁸ John Burns, standing as the Social Democratic Federation candidate in Nottingham, arranged for her to speak on his behalf in the constituency, believing - which evidences her huge influence amongst the working classes during the 1880s - that 'this will strengthen materially my candidature for the West Division.'⁶⁹

⁶⁴ *The Saturday Review*, 17 August 1878.

⁶⁵ *Liverpool Mercury*, 30 May 1885.

⁶⁶ *Leeds Mercury*, 11 November 1885.

⁶⁷ R. Hale to Helen Taylor, 29 May 1885, MTC, file 18, no. 60.

⁶⁸ *Reynolds Newspaper*, 15 November 1885.

⁶⁹ John Burns to Helen Taylor, 9 October 1885, MTC, file 22, no. 34.

When the *Pall Mall Gazette* interviewed her it acknowledged the strength of working-class support for her and concluded that she was ‘likely to poll a large number of votes.’⁷⁰ Helen described her noisy meetings and recounted how supporters of the Liberal candidate had had to be physically restrained in their attempts to obtain a platform on the stage in order to pass resolutions in favour of Mr Strong against her. She laid emphasis on the importance of her campaign for women’s suffrage, maintaining it would be ‘a great impetus to the general advancement of women’ and that it would make women’s suffrage seem moderate in comparison. Claiming that there was strong support for her among women, and reiterating that there was no law against a woman candidate, Helen said that she expected her nomination to be accepted by the Returning Officer; her actions were the only way to get the question of equal rights for women ‘into the public domain...I feel I am acting as a pioneer and I expect at the next election there will be many women candidates for Parliament.’⁷¹ When asked in which class there was most support for women’s rights, she replied that it was amongst ‘respectable working men’, as they valued women’s work inside and outside the home. Working-class women had always worked and remained in their jobs for economic survival. Many working-class men were prepared to vote for a woman MP in defiance of their social superiors and the bourgeois press, who opposed it on the grounds that it was not womanly. Helen’s social status made her a special case: she could circumvent the social rules for women.

⁷⁰ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 21 November 1885.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Again, as in many of her campaigns, not all in the women's suffrage movement were in agreement with Helen's belief that she was promoting women's rights by standing. Sylvia Pankhurst recalled fifty years later how her father, Dr Richard Pankhurst, spoke at one of the election meetings in support of 'that very drastic lady', although the women suffrage societies kept their distance:

They considered it injurious to the suffrage cause. The fact that Helen Taylor cast off the trammels of skirts and wore trousers was an added and most egregious offence in their eyes. Even Mrs Pankhurst was distressed that her husband should be seen walking with a lady in this garb.⁷²

It was most likely the divided skirt of the Rational Dress Society that Helen was wearing, rather than actual trousers, but again she was resisting and challenging the gender expectations of Victorian society and making more cautious women suffragists very nervous that the cause would be brought into disrepute.⁷³

One woman suffragist who did not stay aloof was her former friend in the Land League and Social Democratic Federation, the idiosyncratic campaigner Jessie Craigen. Jessie set up the 'Miss Taylor Election Independent Aid Committee', issued a handbill in support of Helen and attended election meetings, though her election literature stated clearly that her organisation was not part of the official campaign and that it was 'not in communication with Miss Taylor herself or her committee in any way.'⁷⁴ What Helen thought of this support is nowhere recorded, though she kept the handbill Jessie had printed in her papers. Jessie referred to pre-Reformation times in her election leaflet when, she claimed, both Henry III and

⁷² Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement*, pp. 27, 71.

⁷³ 'In the *Science of Dress* (1885) Ada S. Ballin observed that the divided skirts might be made so artfully that an outsider would not know the difference between them and an ordinary skirt. That is they could be made so they did not appear to be trousers' (quoted in Patricia A Cunningham, *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920: Politics, Health, and Art*, (Kent State University, 2002), p. 68. I have been unable to discover whether Helen was a member of the society).

⁷⁴ MTC, box 7.

Edward III had summoned abbesses to Parliament. This, she claimed, gave validity to Helen's stance in English law. No statute existed, she proclaimed, to ban women from Parliament, neither was there anything in common law to forbid it.⁷⁵ Helen also received the support of Henry George. He wrote to her from New York, stating that her election would further the cause of women's rights.⁷⁶

Helen's former Irish Land League colleagues also used their influence and popularity with the large numbers of working-class Irish in Camberwell to win her the Irish vote. This was during the election in which Parnell was urging the Irish in Britain to vote Conservative except in the case of a few named Radical and Liberal candidates who had not shared the Government's intransigence over Home Rule or its meddling in Irish education and who had opposed the anti-democratic Coercion laws:

In no case ought an Irish Nationalist to give a vote in our opinion to a member of that Liberal or Radical party, except in those cases which courageous fealty to the Irish cause in the last parliament has given a guarantee that the candidate will not belong to the servile and cowardly, and unprincipled herd that would break every pledge and violate every principle in obedience to the call of the whip and the mandate of the caucus.⁷⁷

That Helen was amongst the exceptions to this pronouncement would have further incensed the official Liberals, struggling to remain in Government with the withdrawal of the Irish vote.

Michael Davitt wrote a letter of support to Helen, offering to take the chair at an election meeting if he could find the time to leave his work in Dublin. This was

⁷⁵ MTC, box 7.

⁷⁶ Henry George to Helen Taylor, 25 September 1885, MTC, file 17, no. 23.

⁷⁷ Charles Stewart Parnell, *Election Manifesto to the Irish in Britain*, November 1885, [http://www.multitext.ucc.ie/Parnell's Election Manifesto](http://www.multitext.ucc.ie/Parnell's%20Election%20Manifesto).

made into a handbill for distribution amongst the Irish voters. If she were returned to Parliament, Davitt wrote that he was ‘satisfied that Ireland would not have a truer friend or a more staunch supporter in Westminster than you’. Davitt too believed that, successful or not, Helen’s candidature would further the cause of women’s suffrage.⁷⁸ Anna Parnell wrote to Helen from Dublin, giving her support; her letter was published in the press. Anna urged the Irish community in Camberwell to remember the sacrifices Helen had made during the Land War on their behalf. She also recalled the ‘distressing drudgery’ of Helen’s physical effort at evictions during the Land War and that ‘the most enthusiastic and self-sacrificing patriot could have done no more for Ireland than you did.’⁷⁹ Anna followed up this letter by coming over to London to appear with Helen at an election meeting in the constituency. The two women shared a platform at an open-air demonstration in Camberwell attended by many working people, many of them Irish. At the meeting Helen called for an Irish Parliament and claimed that women were now in the position which English Catholics had been fifty years earlier, before O’Connell achieved Catholic emancipation, giving the Catholics the vote and parliamentary representation. Anna appealed to the Irish electorate to vote for Helen, reminding them that during the Land War Helen had made a significant contribution to the success of the Land League and had even physically erected Land League huts herself, to house the evicted peasants.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Michael Davitt to Helen Taylor, 12 November 1885, MTC, file 13, no. 195 and handbill, MTC, box 7.

⁷⁹ Anna Parnell to Helen Taylor, 5 November 1885, MTC, file 18, no. 98.

⁸⁰ *Freeman’s Journal*, 24 November 1885.

Helen's manifesto was essentially the socialism of the Social Democratic Federation she had just left, as set out in the pamphlet *Socialism Made Plain*, signed by the Federation's Executive Committee, which had included Helen, in June 1883:

To the Electors of North Camberwell

A fair day's wages for a fair day's work
6 hour working day which will give work to men where now there is one
Local government cooperation and workshops under elected managers
Restoration of the land
Direct taxation and graduated income tax non under 300 and rising by degrees to
19 shillings in the pound
No wars that are not voted for by the people
Free justice
Restoration of the endowments for free clothing food and education
Free education
Home Rule and legislative independence for Ireland
Universal suffrage, annual parliaments and payment of members⁸¹

Therefore, Helen's election manifesto was a mix of her radical heritage with its Chartist influence, old-fashioned English socialism of the mid-century and the new socialism of the Marxist Social Democratic Federation. Helen campaigned on socialist principles, reminding electors that she was continuing the work of her step-father, who, forty years previously, had laid down 'those principles of socialism which she hoped the people of England would soon be prepared to carry out.'⁸² At the time there was growing pressure for municipal government in London, which Helen supported and which resulted in the London County Council being formed in 1889. She spoke during her canvassing on the need for 'a federated government for London with a general council to control such matters as the police, gas, water, electricity, steam tramways and railways.'⁸³ Her election literature appealed to voters to remember her work on the London School Board on their behalf:

⁸¹ Election handbill, MTC, box 7.

⁸² *Daily Gazette for Middlesbrough*, 2 June 1885.

⁸³ *Huddersfield Daily Chronicle*, 1 June 1885.

The People's Candidate
Vote for
Miss Taylor
The Tried Friend
Of
The People
And
Their Children⁸⁴

Helen campaigned vigorously during the autumn of 1885, with the support of radical Liberals, some of her former Social Democratic Federation colleagues, members of the various Land Reform groups she was involved in and leading Irish nationalists. Her election agent was her close friend, Mrs Ethel Leach.⁸⁵ Helen's electioneering met with much opposition and often resulted in rowdy, occasionally violent meetings as her opponents tried to disrupt proceedings. The future Labour Party activist, F.W. Soutter, who was her advisor during the campaign, recalled the violence in his memoirs. Opposition to her standing was so strong amongst official Liberals that they would disrupt her speeches. Soutter recounted one particular violent event when 'a chair came hurtling through the air' towards the platform.⁸⁶ The press also recorded the hatred and violence she experienced when speaking and the affront her candidature was to the middle-class respectability of the separate spheres ideology. One account recalled the 'utmost disorder' when Helen was greeted with 'loud cheers and groans' and was unable to speak for five minutes, so loud was the disruption. 'A free fight then ensued and the ladies had to beat a hasty retreat to the ante room.'⁸⁷ Helen had been brought up in a household which understood that gender is a social construct and she was pushing the boundaries and

⁸⁴ Election handbill, MTC, box 7.

⁸⁵ *English Woman's Review*, October 1885.

⁸⁶ F.W. Soutter, *Recollections of a Labour Pioneer* (London, 1923), p. 94.

⁸⁷ *Lloyds Weekly Paper*, 1 November 1885.

resisting accepted Victorian ideas of femininity.⁸⁸ This challenge led her to be branded in the press by one opponent as ‘an unsexed female agitator.’⁸⁹

But all this campaigning and support was to be in vain. On the day of the election the Presiding Officer refused to accept Helen’s nomination papers as valid. She presented her papers in person and protested vehemently at the refusal of the officer to accept them, declaring his actions were illegal. The official maintained that under Section 4 of the Ballot Act candidates were referred to as ‘his’ and ‘him’ and therefore women were excluded. The *English Women’s Review* supported Helen’s view that in many other Acts masculine pronouns did actually include women in the meaning and scope of the Act.⁹⁰ The press had foreseen that this would be the case. It would be ridiculous, the *Leeds Mercury* had proclaimed, to change constitutional law through ‘the action of a knot of Radical socialists.’ Helen was, in the writer’s opinion, a ‘pushing and active agitator and she likes to keep her name before the public.’⁹¹ *The Standard* declared that Helen had shown a lack of knowledge of ‘the elementary rule of grammar in the differentiation between masculine and feminine genders’.⁹² Some others insisted that Helen had a legal right to stand for parliament. John Chapman, of the National Liberal Club, wrote in commiseration to her; he felt that the refusal of the Presiding Officer to accept her nomination was ‘an abuse of his rightful authority.’⁹³ The *Law Journal* concluded that if Helen had taken legal advice she may well have secured her nomination. By turning up in person it was obvious she was a woman. The Returning Officer might not have legally been able

⁸⁸ See Harriet Taylor Mill’s writings cited in chapter 2 for her ideas on gender.

⁸⁹ *Yorkshire Gazette*, 29 October 1885. See also *Manchester Evening News*, 11 November 1885 for an account of violence at her meetings.

⁹⁰ *English Women’s Review*, December 1885.

⁹¹ *Leeds Mercury*, 21 November 1885.

⁹² *The Standard*, 1 December 1885.

⁹³ John Chapman to Helen Taylor, 5 December 1885, MTC, file 4, no. 55.

to reject her papers, despite her name, Helen, being on them, if they had been submitted by someone else, 'but she preferred boldly to avow her sex.'⁹⁴

This incident suggests that Helen was not adept at playing the political game and making the concessions necessary to achieve her ends. She was headstrong and regarded a stratagem as unnecessary, given what she saw as the moral force of her demands. She was often impetuous rather than strategic. She preferred arguing with the Presiding Officer over her nomination papers to sending someone to present them on her behalf. Cases had been documented of women being allowed to vote because their names had been put erroneously on the electoral register by a clerk who thought they were transcribing a man's name. Once on the register they could not be turned away on Election Day. Helen would have been aware of this as such cases were discussed in the *English Women's Review* and she could have played a more politically considered game, but moral right was moral right to her.⁹⁵ She would never have tried to conceal her identity to secure her nomination as the first woman to stand as a parliamentary candidate. She was asserting the right of a woman to stand and would not have used duplicitous ways to obtain the nomination. That would have been as immoral to her as Hyndman criticising people in the columns of his newspaper with his identity concealed.

It is an injustice that we no longer remember Helen's attempt to stand for Parliament, nearly thirty years before Constance Markievicz claimed her place in

⁹⁴ Quoted in *The Times*, 27 November 1885.

⁹⁵ The *English Women's Review* made an issue of recording women who had managed to get on the register and vote. For example, in the March 1876 edition, the journal recounted the story of a woman named Christian Donald who had been put on the electoral register by error. 'She claimed her privilege and as her name appeared on the burgers' roll, the returning officer could not refuse her ballot paper.' This is just one instance of a number of such cases down the years.

history as the first woman elected to the House of Commons. Helen's campaign quickly faded from historical consciousness, as did much of Helen's political involvement when her generation passed away and the radical world she had inhabited with it. Her niece recalled, in her diaries of 1902-4, being surprised at the extent of Helen's political life and that her dying aunt was such a passionate socialist.⁹⁶ The only detailed account of the 1885 election campaign, by the American academic, Evelyn Pugh, which was discussed in the opening chapter, is inaccurate in that it reduces Helen to a political eccentric and indicates no understanding of Helen's socialism.⁹⁷ The campaign deserves to be restored to the historical narrative as a further example of how radical men and women resisted the mores of society and worked together to challenge the status quo. The bourgeois ideology of separate spheres for men and women faced constant challenge and opposition and the extent of working-class support for Helen's campaigns, which was admitted in the newspaper accounts, warns against accepting the mistaken view that Victorian bourgeois morality was uniformly accepted and non-negotiable. Victorian mores, which refused political agency to women, faced constant opposition and challenge. The fights and chaos at Helen's hustings are testament to the fact that the role of women in society was being physically as well as intellectually fought over. Many men, particularly of the working class, were prepared to support Helen's assault on the social status quo. They had been electing women to the School Boards for fifteen years and had become accustomed to seeing women's names on a ballot paper. They had seen how, once elected, these women worked hard to support the working-class children in their division of the board.

⁹⁶ Mary Taylor, diaries, MTC, file 58, no. 4.

⁹⁷ Evelyn Pugh, 'The First Woman Candidate for Parliament,' *International Journal of Women's History*, vol. 1 pt 4, 1978, pp. 378-390.

Helen's campaign to stand for election as an MP stands as a first for women and is evidence that, by the latter part of the nineteenth century, women were challenging for their place as political players equal to men. By 1885 an exceptional woman, through her birth, social standing, connections and wealth, could secure the Radical nomination as a prospective parliamentary candidate, run a professional campaign and secure the support of men from the world of politics and economics. This was achieved despite the press and many Liberals trying to uphold the patriarchal state and belittling her attempt at gender equality through a vigorous and sometimes violent campaign against her. Helen herself compared her campaign to Daniel O'Connell's election, in which he had challenged the anti-Catholic laws which made him ineligible to stand. Helen's campaign to dismantle separate spheres in this way and gain women direct representation in the Imperial Parliament was an important event in the historiography of the fight for women's equality, especially since it drew a large amount of support from ordinary men and women. This was despite a hostile press and the timidity of the women's movement, who feared that Helen was being so aggressively assertive of women's rights that she would alienate male supporters of suffrage.

Promoting women's rights within the Liberal Party: Helen Taylor's feminism and work within the Radical Clubs and the Women's Liberal Federation

As revealed in her work on the London School Board, Helen was loyal to the causes she espoused and never a blind adherent to party politics. She distrusted all political organisations and despised those who would toe any party line even to the detriment of their own beliefs.⁹⁸ She would work with anyone to further women's suffrage,

⁹⁸ Ethel Leach wrote to Helen, saying that she had come round to Helen's distrust of 'political associations,' 6 October 1888, MTC, file 8, no. 43.

land reform, Irish Home Rule or improve democracy in Britain. As illustrated above, this brought the wrath of the Liberal Party down on her continually throughout her School Board career and her involvement in Ireland, and the party fought hard to unseat her during School Board elections.

Helen, however, remained loyal to her radical heritage and remained an influential member of a number of radical clubs throughout her political life. The Social Democratic Federation had drawn its initial membership from these clubs, until Hyndman's more overtly Marxist doctrines had led to the withdrawal of many of these organisations from their affiliation to the party. After Helen left Hyndman and his party she continued her involvement with radicalism. She was elected as a Vice President of Portsmouth Radical Club in 1886 and was also President of Camberwell Radical Club.⁹⁹ Helen remained, however, a controversial figure in Liberal politics. Hatcham Liberal Club, for example, wrote to her in 1888, asking her to be a candidate in the forthcoming School Board elections for the Greenwich Division, an offer she declined.¹⁰⁰ On the other hand, when the Liberal Association in Great Yarmouth was looking for a speaker in 1887, the Vice President refused to invite Helen on '...the grounds that she had treated W Scrutton so badly', although 'some of the other members thought it was the other way round.'¹⁰¹ Helen would have been no supporter of Joseph Chamberlain due to his opposition to both women's suffrage and Home Rule. His radical programme of 1885 would, however, have met with her approval in its advocacy of Church of England disestablishment, free elementary education, reformed local government, the establishment of county councils, slum clearance, the creation of smallholdings and graduated income tax.

⁹⁹ *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 29 May 1885 and *Hampshire Telegraph*, 16 April 1887.

¹⁰⁰ Hatcham Liberal Club to Helen Taylor, 15 November 1888, MTC file 15, no. 85.

¹⁰¹ Ethel Leach to Helen Taylor, MTC, file 18, no. 44. See Chapter 3 for the Scrutton libel case.

She had been supporting all these causes throughout her public life.¹⁰² Her opinion of a government in which Chamberlain was a minister was that it would be ‘only a little better than any other government now existing in the world, although contemptibly behind public opinion.’¹⁰³ The Liberals were, in Helen’s opinion, moving in the right policy direction by the late 1880s.

Again Helen had influence within the radical liberal world as she financially supported those organisations within which she worked. Helen was a member of the Liberal League, of which a Mr Talbot was the Honourable Secretary.¹⁰⁴ In 1890 Talbot wrote to her when the League faced financial difficulties and asked her advice. He wrote hoping she would ‘come to the aid of the organisation’, as she had previously promised. The League was £350 in debt and although members of the committee would help, further aid to clear the deficit had been promised by the prominent Liberal Arnold Morley.¹⁰⁵ Helen was aghast at the approach to Morley and showed that she had lost nothing of her innate distrust of party politics:

I was much surprised to hear from you that you have been in communication with Mr Arnold Morley respecting the affairs of the Liberal League, as I understood from yourself and others that it was owing to the hostile and disingenuous action of the Liberal whips and party wire pullers that the difficulties of the Liberal League had chiefly arisen.¹⁰⁶

She continued that the Liberals must have something to gain from the League to want to put money into it and advised that the League should not panic; if she found herself personally pursued for the debt she would:

¹⁰² Liberal Democrat History Group at www.liberalhistory.org.uk.

¹⁰³ Undated draft letter from Helen Taylor to H.M. Hyndman, MTC, file 18, no. 34.

¹⁰⁴ This is not the Liberal League, formed in 1902 by Liberal Imperialists opposed to the policies of Campbell Bannerman, but an earlier organisation with the same name.

¹⁰⁵ Mr Talbot to Helen Taylor, 7 January 1890, MTC, file 18, no. 66.

¹⁰⁶ Helen Taylor to Mr Talbot, 21 January 1890, MTC, file 18, no. 67

... make it an opportunity of saying my say both about Liberal whips in general and Mr Arnold Morley in particular in their dealings with the Radicals. And also about tradesmen 'running' political associations.¹⁰⁷

Helen seems to have been able to mentally 'return' to the Liberal fold through their public commitment to equal rights and the fact that men and women were working together as political partners in the Liberal League. At the inaugural banquet of the Tolstoy Lodge of the Liberal League in 1887 she commented that:

The Liberal League is an organisation consisting now of eighty five associations of men and women (or women only) with upwards of four thousand members, all bonded together for the two fold purpose of liberal organisation and education.¹⁰⁸

In the same speech she praised the organisation for admitting women on the same terms as men. Since the early 1880s the Liberal clubs had been voting to admit women as equal members.¹⁰⁹ As referenced in previous chapters Helen spoke often in terms of women in politics raising morality in public life through their involvement:

It was the first anniversary of the Liberal League which was the first political association in any country which had given absolute and complete equality to men and women...It had put into its programme that it would put principle before party, and it demanded morality on the part of public men and she hailed in that fact the first fruits of women's work in politics...Justice, honesty, morality: these were the things which women had to urge on men.¹¹⁰

Such a move to gender equality would certainly have brought Helen closer to the Liberal Party again. Helen would have welcomed the formation of the Women's Liberal Federation as furthering the advancement of women in public life and her correspondence includes many offers to speak to such groups up and down the country. The first Women's Liberal Association had been set up in Bristol by the

¹⁰⁷ Helen Taylor to A. Day, 11 January 1890, MTC, file 18, no. 15.

¹⁰⁸ *English Women's Review*, July 1887.

¹⁰⁹ For example Stanningley Liberal Club had done so in 1884, as reported in *The Democrat*, the paper founded by Henry George, Michael Davitt and Helen Taylor, on 22 November 1884.

¹¹⁰ *South and East London Press*, 14 January 1888, press cutting, MTC, box 7.

suffragist Anna Maria Priestman in 1881 and many others quickly followed.¹¹¹ By 1886 there were fifteen such associations with six thousand members and at a London conference, on 27 May 1886, a Women's Liberal Federation was formed to unite these associations.¹¹² The rules of the Federation were:

1. To promote the adoption of liberal principles by the Government
2. Just legislation for women and protection of the interests of children.
3. The advancement of political education by literature and meetings.
4. The promotion of a Women's Liberal Association in every constituency and the admittance of women to membership of any Liberal Association.¹¹³

From these aims it can be seen that the Federation was formed not only so that women Liberals could provide support to the Liberal Party but also to further the advancement of the women within the party through gender equality in membership. It has been referred to by F.H. Herrick, a historian of British Liberalism, as a 'Trojan Horse' which allowed a feminist agenda to infiltrate the party.¹¹⁴ In 1892 the Federation adopted women's suffrage as official policy and in 1893 it called for its inclusion in the programme of the Liberal Party. Anna Maria Priestman's Bristol Women's Liberal Federation had, in 1881, been one of the first to refuse to campaign for Liberal men who were against women's suffrage.¹¹⁵ The Women's Liberal Federation would have drawn Helen to it because of its promotion of such a feminist programme and proactive work for women's suffrage. It also demanded equal divorce law for men and women and the repeal of employment law which excluded women from certain jobs. By 1892 it had 307 branches and 51,000

¹¹¹F.H. Herrick, 'The Origins of the National Liberal Federation,' *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2 June 1945, pp. 116-129.

¹¹² Women's Liberal Union, *Annual Report 1890*.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Herrick, 'The Origins of the National Liberal Federation,' p. 20.

¹¹⁵ June Hannam, 'Women and Politics,' in June Purvis (ed.), *Women's History: Britain 1850-1945*, (London, 1997), chapter 9.

members.¹¹⁶ Helen had been working for decades on radical policies which the Liberals had now adopted officially.

Helen accepted many invitations to speak to the newly formed Women's Liberal Association, speaking on various subjects including Home Rule for Ireland and land reform. When Eva McLaren arranged for Helen to speak at the newly formed branch in Crewe, she wrote to her, asking whether she wanted a mixed meeting of men and women and assuring her that the 1,100 members were 'sound on all the questions which you feel so strongly.'¹¹⁷ Helen's friend Ethel Leach discussed with her the Women's Liberal Association in Great Yarmouth, which Ethel had been asked to form. She likened it to philanthropy within the traditional women's sphere of social welfare, rather than a revolutionary move forward for women's rights: 'I suppose such an organisation might do good work in helping women to form sound opinion on questions affecting the wellbeing of the Community'¹¹⁸ Ethel was sorry that Helen was not to stand in the county council elections and lamented that the women's suffrage movement had 'shown such apathy in the matter' in that they did not 'press the claims of women voting and holding seats when the bill was going through.'¹¹⁹ Again the feminist movement had shown itself to be extremely cautious. The Local Government Act of 1888 saw the creation of County Councils and the first elections were held in January 1889 with women ratepayers qualified to vote.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Herrick, *The Origins of the National Liberal Federation*, p. 20.

¹¹⁷ Eva McLaren to Helen Taylor, 29 November 1888, MTC, file 18, no. 120.

¹¹⁸ Ethel Leach to Helen Taylor, 16 February 1889, MTC, file 18, no. 36.

¹¹⁹ Ethel Leach to Helen Taylor, 6 October 1888, MTC, file 18, no. 33.

¹²⁰ *English Women's Journal*, January 1889.

In 1891 the Women's Liberal Federation passed a resolution calling for national free education and self-government in Ireland, for which Helen had been working publicly for over twenty years.¹²¹ Such policy changes largely explain Helen's continuing involvement with the Liberals, despite the animosity the party had shown to her. She would work with anyone regardless of party if they promoted her political demands. This support for Home Rule split the Women's Federation, just as it split the Liberal Party. The *English Women's Journal* followed the resolutions of the Women's Liberal associations up and down the country for and against Home Rule. For instance, Chesterfield Women's Liberal Association passed a resolution in support of an Irish Parliament,¹²² whilst the journal also gave accounts of those opposed, such as the Ulster Women's Liberal Unionist Association headed by Miss Todd.¹²³ Helen commented on the Liberal conversion to Home Rule at the time of the first Home Rule Bill in 1886 to her fellow land campaigner Henry George:

You and Mrs George will have been amused by the enthusiasm of our English 'Radicals' and the Irish Nationalists, over Mr Gladstone's tardy conversion, at the same time I am sure you will both be of the opinion that 'It is never too late to mend.' The sudden movements of our Politicians on the political chessboard exceed, I fancy, the worst you have to complain of in the United States.¹²⁴

By 1887 Helen, long an opponent of Gladstone, felt able to attend a meeting in honour of his birthday in Eastbourne and speak in praise of his Irish policy.¹²⁵ Thus Helen continued her embattled relationship with the Liberal Party until the end of her public life, welcoming policy change, especially support for Home Rule and the increasing influence women were having within the party. She used the opportunities the policy changes gave her for speaking engagements to influence

¹²¹ *Manchester Times*, 29 May 1891.

¹²² *English Women's Journal*, September 1888.

¹²³ *English Women's Journal*, May 1890.

¹²⁴ Helen Taylor to Henry George, 26 August 1886, HGGC.

¹²⁵ *Huddersfield Daily Chronicle*, 30 December 1887.

public opinion on women's suffrage, Ireland and, throughout the 1880s, on land reform.

It is in Helen's work for the Moral Reform Union that her continuing adherence to radical liberalism can be seen. The MRU was created in 1881 by Dr Elizabeth Blackwell and Mrs S.W. Browne, its objective being 'the promotion of 'pure family life' and 'the spread of pure literature bearing on social and political morality.'¹²⁶ In its first year it had sixty-eight members including Helen.¹²⁷ Helen's membership is further proof that, although she briefly embraced Marxism in the early 1880s, she never broke her link with her past. She kept faith with the concerns of moral liberal Nonconformism, which had informed the feminism of her youth. It has been seen that Helen supported the inclusion of Marxist ideology into the Democratic Federation's constitution in 1884, as an executive member. At the same time Helen was campaigning for the abolition of the Contagious Diseases Act and promoting feminism as a member of the MRU, an organisation entrenched in the moral outlook of the old Liberal order of Harriet and John Stuart Mill. Helen was thus straddling two worlds during the early 1880s; her active membership of the MRU sits strangely with her chairing a woman's group for the Social Democratic Federation with Olive Schreiner. Olive was a friend of the socialist homosexual Edward Carpenter and part of a circle which was challenging traditional attitudes to sex and marriage.¹²⁸ The MRU was upholding marriage and opposing easier divorce.

Helen's decision to leave the SDF must have been due, in part, to her inability to leave the political world of Mill behind and fully embrace the new socialist creed.

¹²⁶ *First Annual Report*, April 1882.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ S. Rowbotham, *Edward Carpenter, A Life of Liberty and Love* (London, 2008), p. 91.

Hyndman, it has been noted, had become incensed with what he termed her adherence to ‘trifling movements’.¹²⁹ The MRU may well have been one he had in mind. Helen could not make the full intellectual leap into modern socialism or to the freedoms being demanded by younger socialist reformers such as Olive Schreiner. Carpenter relates in his autobiography how Olive and ‘her close friend Eleanor Marx, were among a little band of Ibsenite women pushing the boundaries of behaviour.’ They were overturning the accepted moral codes which Helen worked so hard in the Moral Reform Union to uphold, for they supported free love against traditional marriage. Eleanor was herself in a free union with Helen’s school board ally Edward Aveling and both were political colleagues of Helen’s in the SDF. At the same time as working with them in the SDF Helen was opposing the free union of suffragist Elizabeth Wolstenholme with Ben Elmy. Mrs Browne, then Honourable Secretary of the MRU had written to Helen about Mrs Elmy, regretting that she did ‘not base her morality on the same source as ourselves,’ which gives an insight into Helen’s stance on such matters.¹³⁰ Miss Chapman read a paper to the organisation in May 1890 entitled ‘Why we should Oppose Divorce’ which was later published.¹³¹ In its 4th Annual Report the organisation vowed to ‘wage an unrelenting war’ on free love, which it equated with lust.¹³² The MRU also opposed the reintroduction of Sir Charles Dilke into public life after his divorce and protested when the Women’s Liberal Association in the Forest of Dean assisted his meetings there. Dilke had promised not to return to public service until cleared of having had an extra-marital affair.¹³³ Helen, so radical and, to modern eyes, so ahead of her

¹²⁹ Henry Hyndman to Helen Taylor, 25 July 1884, MTC, file 18, no. 43.

¹³⁰ Mrs Leigh Browne to Helen Taylor, 11 February 1890, MTC, file 10, no. 88.

¹³¹ Copy of speech is held in MTC, file 20.

¹³² Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, p. 154.

¹³³ 7th Annual Report, 26 June 1889.

time in her work on the School Board and in Irish and British politics during the 1880s, remained traditional in her morality.

The enduring link between the MRU and the world and work of Helen's step-father can be seen in that its major campaign was for the abolition of the Contagious Diseases Acts in England and throughout the Empire. Helen and Mill's work for repeal was discussed briefly in chapter 2 of this thesis. The acts were finally rescinded in Britain in 1886 after a campaign of over twenty years. In 1888 Walter McLaren, whose mother Priscilla had long been a close friend and fellow suffragist of Helen's, carried a motion in the House of Commons to repeal the acts in India, though the 1889 Containment Act India had seen them continued on the sub-continent. Repeal in India then became a focus of the work of the Union. It sent repeal literature there and to Ceylon and petitioned the House of Commons on the subject.¹³⁴ The MRU was a feminist organisation which maintained that the Acts would have been repealed much sooner if women had been granted the suffrage:

This battle, which was, year by year, so bravely fought for sixteen years in Parliament, would have been won much sooner had women possessed the vote.¹³⁵

Along with the majority of campaigners it deplored the dual moral standard which made women submit to medical examination and treatment on mere suspicion of being a prostitute but did not submit the men who paid for their services to such enforced control.

In 1890, on the retirement of Mrs Woolcott Browne, Helen became Honourable Secretary of the Moral Reform Union. The organisation was, however, already in

¹³⁴ *6th Annual Report*, May 1888.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

decline by the time Helen took over the running of it, indicating that once the Contagious Diseases Acts were repealed its *raison d'être* had gone. Its finances were severely strained. The Annual Reports show Helen to have been the major financial backer of the union. This is yet another example of her financial importance to every organisation with which she was involved. When Helen took over as Honourable Secretary, the Treasurer, E.L. Miers, correctly predicted that the union could not continue without her.¹³⁶ The catalyst for the demise of the ailing MRU would be Helen's resignation in April 1895 from both her membership and the Honourable Secretaryship.

By this time Helen, who was now almost 64, was suffering from increasing ill-health and was spending most of her time at her home in Avignon, directing the organisation through letters to the Secretary, Miss Albert, in London. Helen was increasingly exasperated at Miss Albert's inability to act on her instructions and that she had been sending out circulars and letters without prior approval at a meeting of the Executive Committee and by the Honourable Secretary.¹³⁷ When Helen resigned from the MRU she cited the impossibility of working with Miss Albert.¹³⁸ How far Helen's own personality was responsible for the failing relationship between herself and her secretary is impossible to know. Other leading members of the organisation supported Helen and some resigned, though the MRU limped on for a number of years. So ended Helen's work with the MRU and her life on the public stage.

It is rather fitting that Helen's last major involvement in public service should have had such a direct connection with the world of her younger days – the battle to

¹³⁶ E L Miers to Helen Taylor, 22 November 1890, MTC, file 10, no 21.

¹³⁷ Draft letter Helen Taylor to Fanny Albert, 5 January, 1895, MTC, file 10, no. 34.

¹³⁸ Draft letter Helen Taylor to Mrs Tremeheere, 22 April 1895, MTC, file 11, no. 215.

rescind the Contagious Diseases Acts. Helen had carried the torch of her step-father's concerns, on which she had worked with him as an equal partner, throughout her life. The demise of the Moral Reform Union showed this world to be fading into history. A younger generation of feminists would have different attitudes to divorce, sex and morality, issues on which Helen's views belonged to a bygone age.

Yet much of Helen's public life saw her ahead of her time and not constrained by gender or class expectations. On the School Board she advocated equal pay and conditions for women teachers, boys and girls following the same curriculum, free universal education, abolition of corporal punishment and provision of crèches, to enable girls who were needed by their mothers to look after younger siblings to continue their education. In her work in the Social Democratic Party she embraced Marxism and sought to change society through international socialism, sending money to the persecuted German socialists. In her work for Home Rule and Land Reform in Ireland she treated the Irish as equals at a time when they were regarded in Britain as inferior to the Anglo-Saxon race and she fiercely opposed British rule in Ireland and the landlord system. Her work for land nationalisation would have seen a re-distribution of wealth which is still unachieved in the modern world, especially her demand for a land tax. She demanded a society in which men and women could work alongside one another and live equally. She worked for a world in which women could not only vote but be voted for, as her Camberwell campaign shows. In contrast, her work in the MRU, upholding the social status quo in marriage and sexual matters, firmly locates her as a Victorian radical.

By the 1890s, the era of the 'new woman', Helen would have seemed old-fashioned to many of the younger generation of educated women. This 'new woman' was typically middle- or upper-class, determined to live an egalitarian life with men but, unlike her older feminist sisters, prepared to openly challenge the sexual limits to her independence.¹³⁹ It is somewhat apt that Helen faded out of public view at the same time as the demise of the MRU and the rise of new morality. In the last years of Helen's public life she was caught between two worlds: the liberal politics of the old order and the politics of the 1880s socialist revival. Her unique link with the most revered political philosopher of the Victorian age, which had given her social and political standing, was no longer regarded by younger reformers as of consequence.¹⁴⁰ Also her feminism, that of the Unitarian demand for equality between men and women, which she inherited from her mother, stands in stark contrast to that of the 'new woman' of the 1890s, who was demanding a new sexual freedom for both men and women. This important transition in political and social thought will be explored further in the final chapter, to offer some explanation as to why her life and work have been passed over in the historiography.

¹³⁹ Bland, *Banishing the Beast* p. 144.

¹⁴⁰ Evidence for this is in the concluding chapter.

6. The feminism and political radicalism of Helen Taylor: A final assessment of its importance in the historiography.

In this conclusion it will be argued that the original contribution to historical knowledge made in this thesis is twofold. Firstly, it restores a hitherto marginalised feminist campaigner back into the historical narrative as an illustration of how men and women together forged the political and social changes of the 1880s and 1890s. It has been seen that some privileged women had political agency in Victorian reforming groups, but this agency had been made invisible in the writings of a male dominated historical academy, and not corrected by many feminist historians. This has, however, been addressed over the last forty years by the work of the first generation of women historians cited in this work. These historians have succeeded in of women's history being accepted into the academy. There is still work to be done on putting women back into history and this thesis has addressed, for instance, the scarcity of historical accounts of politically involved women in the historiography of the land reform movement of the nineteenth century.

Secondly, this study challenges those historians who have insisted that Victorian British feminism was imperial in nature and based its claims for equality on a belief in the rightness and necessity of the imperial project.¹ Orthodoxies become established, including within 'alternative' historiography, such as that written by feminists, and these should be constantly challenged and revised. This thesis has shown that not all British feminists of the era supported Empire; the public life and work of Helen Taylor is a testament to the fact that there existed an anti-imperial, socialist Victorian feminism often at loggerheads with the mainstream. It supports,

¹ Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History* (Chapel Hill, 1994).

therefore, the work of researchers such as Vron Ware who have identified a non-imperial feminism of the era.² The opposition of many British feminists to Helen's choice of campaigns, particularly to her involvement in Ireland, has been highlighted throughout. It will be argued in this conclusion that it would, therefore, be more correct to talk of a plurality of feminisms existing in the period under consideration.

Helen Taylor's contribution to Victorian public life reconsidered

This concluding chapter will first assess the extent to which the work of one person, Helen Taylor, contributed to the movements she was involved in. It will be argued that the historiography is incomplete without acknowledging the influence she had on the social and political organisations of which she was a member. Anna Parnell's biographer attests that Anna was influenced in the writing of her own historical account of the Land War by a view of history which Helen had gained from her knowledge of Henry Thomas Buckle. Buckle believed that the actions of individuals are of no importance in the writing of history.³ Anna Parnell wrote to Helena Molony about her book *The Tale of a Great Sham* stating that:

I avoided personalities as much as possible as I consider the actions of particular individuals are unimportant in history, while the actions of groups, classes, etc of persons are more important, because the former are not met with again, and the latter are.⁴

Helen had edited *The Miscellaneous and Posthumous works of Henry Thomas Buckle* for publication in 1872. If Helen did indeed influence Anna, which she most probably did, and shared in her belief that individuals are historical asides, her own life proves the opposite. In remembering the individual called Helen Taylor we

² Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale* (London, 1992).

³ J. Cote, 'Anna and Fanny Parnell' (London, 1991), p. 186.

⁴ Letter quoted in T.W. Moody, 'Anna Parnell and the Land League', *Hermathena* (Ireland, 1974), pp. 5-17, p. 1.

commemorate a life of public service of a pioneer who strove to improve democracy and the living conditions of ordinary working people. In addition the individual, Helen Taylor, is testimony to the fact that women have been wrongly written out of the historical narrative of the nineteenth century as if they had had no influence and importance. The individual Helen Taylor had political agency and influence and used both. To read a history of an account without the personalities involved, as in Anna's account of the Land War in Ireland, makes the account incomplete and often incomprehensible.⁵ Individual people change history. Helen played such a part and it deserves recognition, although it has been largely unacknowledged in the historiography until this study.

This thesis has demonstrated how Helen's political motivation arose from her feminism and the influence of her upbringing by her mother, the women's rights campaigner Harriet Taylor, and the leading Western political philosopher of his era, John Stuart Mill. There has been little understanding of this in the historiography, which has concentrated on her often intractable stance on matters such as the running of the London Society for Women's Suffrage, discussed in the opening chapter. There has been scant examination as to how her feminism provided the impetus to engage in movements ameliorating the lives of men and women in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. This study has shown how she brought her belief in the equality of men and women into land reform, during which she called for women to become involved in debates on land ownership and linked the loss of land rights for ordinary people with the loss of ancient political rights for women. It has also shown how in her School Board work she fought tirelessly to give girls and

⁵ See Moody's criticisms of Anna's account.

women teachers equality in the state school system and resisted the patriarchal practices of the School Board. It has revealed how her involvement with Irish nationalist feminists alienated her further from many in the British suffrage movement, who saw their campaigns as a threat to Empire. Her involvement in radical reform has been identified as being facilitated by the social contacts and intellectual development which her early life had given her. Along with wealth and few family responsibilities these privileges gave her influence within organisations, notwithstanding a separate spheres ideology. The ideology of separate spheres was successfully circumvented by some women. It certainly was a powerful bourgeois ideal but it was social convention not enshrined in law. Despite being ignored until recently by historians of the land question, it has been demonstrated that Helen and other women worked alongside men in the land reforming, educational and political organisations and that she had agency within them.

The 1869 Municipal Franchise Act, which allowed women to vote in municipal elections and sit alongside men as elected members on the new School Boards, has been credited as a pivotal moment in women's political involvement. However, it has been seen that their involvement was often contested and that the women had to resist patriarchy and misogyny on the School Boards, within the land movement and in the Social Democratic Federation. Yet, it must not be forgotten that some men supported the involvement of women, for example Benjamin Lucraft on the School Board and Henry George and Michael Davitt in the land movement, and that Helen was able to influence such men with her feminism. George has been cited as openly acknowledged her influence in his support for women in public life. Men and

women, this study has emphasised, worked together to reform society and improve democracy and the lot of the working class.

This work has further illustrated how Helen, in the rapidly changing social landscape of her middle age, straddled two political generations, that of mid-century Unitarian radicalism which linked women's rights with the improvement of democracy and that of the new socialism and newly created organisations, such as the School Board, Land Reform groups and the Irish Land League. The world she had grown up in was being transformed by social reform. Her work in the Moral Reform Union, undertaken at a time of sweeping changes in the opportunities open to women and the emergence of the 'new woman' who challenged the existing moral code espoused by Helen, shows her to have been, towards the end of her life, a campaigner from a bygone age. She remained true to the reforming liberal world of her youth but this old world order of radical reform was being superseded by the next generation of social and political campaigners, like Annie Besant and Eleanor Marx, who challenged existing ideas of sexual morality as part of their feminism. Helen resisted these changes, as evidenced in her support of the Moral Reform Union in which, for example, she opposed free unions.

The working class in the early twentieth century would attach their political allegiance to the newly formed Labour Party. This would destroy the concept of the radical working man who voted Liberal - so integral a component of Helen's world. The previous chapter has shown how, when she left the Social Democratic Party, she 'returned' to her Liberal roots, which she had in fact never really left. She may have been at loggerheads with official Liberalism throughout her public career but

she always remained a nineteenth-century radical Liberal, even when in Hyndman's party. Her letters to Hyndman, quoted in an earlier chapter, have a morality firmly entrenched in the world of her step-father thirty years earlier; her morality was fixed. It was that of a mid-century radical Liberal.

As one of the intentions in this chapter is to assess Helen's contribution and her importance to the historiography the questions have to be asked: Could she have been more effective if she had compromised and is this important? Did her adherence to preserving the memory and reputation of John Stuart Mill hinder her ability to change with the times? Why did she disappear from the historical account when it has been noted, in an earlier chapter, that the local newspaper heralded her arrival in Preston on a speaking engagement as a visit by 'the foremost women of her time'?⁶

The historiography has depicted Helen as an imposing personality who was difficult to engage with on a personal level. This, it has been claimed, made her less successful because she failed to make the necessary political alliances through an inability to compromise.⁷ This thesis has previously referenced how Patricia Hollis regarded Helen as ineffectual on the School Board through an inability to form such alliances. This one-dimensional view of Helen has been challenged throughout and Helen's achievements on the School Board evaluated and acknowledged fully for the first time. The emphasis in the historiography has not been on what she did, but on portraying her as an unlikable personality with whom it was impossible to have a

⁶ *The Lancashire Evening Post*, 19 October 1886.

⁷ Patricia Hollis, *Ladies Elect* p 166. Hollis compared Helen unfavourably with Annie Besant.

warm relationship. For instance, M.S. Packe, a biographer of John Stuart Mill, felt able to say of Helen:

After Mill's death, she became the jealous guardian of all his thoughts and relics. She grew priggish and overpowering: eventually mean, suspicious truculent and sometimes half beside herself with passion. She became a great light in her various causes, women's suffrage and the London School Board. For the rest she clung on grimly at Avignon.⁸

Such emotive language in a serious biography needs to be challenged. This thesis has shown how Helen was sometimes unable to move beyond a blind adherence to Mill's philosophy and could be domineering. She had faults, but Packe's language, which reduces her motivation to priggishness, is unsubstantiated belittling dressed up as historical fact. Referring to her causes marginalises her political and social contribution. 'Her' causes were those of most radicals of the time, the leading liberal causes of the late nineteenth century. Packe makes them sound like the philanthropic work of a bored well-to-do lady. His reference to her becoming 'eventually mean, suspicious truculent and sometimes half beside herself with passion' would seem to refer to her behaviour in her last years, as recounted in the diary of her niece, which is part of Helen's archive. It is quite clear from the diary that Helen was suffering a form of dementia which exhibited itself in those symptoms. As for the fact that she 'clung grimly on in Avignon', it was a home she returned to when her political work in England allowed or when she was too ill to continue. Packe's assessment is too emotive and unconsidered but it stands in the historiography as the truth.

This work has contested the negative and scant coverage of Helen Taylor's political and social campaigning by historians of education and land in particular. It has depicted a woman who attracted controversy by her refusal to compromise. She

⁸M.S. Packe, *The Life of John Stuart Mill*, p. 413.

refused to withdraw libellous comments against a fellow School Board member and preferred to pay the considerable sum of £1,000 as an out-of-court settlement rather than withdraw one word of her allegations. She insisted on going to present her nomination papers herself when she was attempting to stand as a parliamentary candidate, which contemporary newspaper reports believed to be a decision which was detrimental to having her papers accepted. If she had listened to legal advice she may well have succeeded in having her nomination secured. She has, it has been noted, been seen by the historiography as not being effective on the School Board because she could not make the necessary alliances, but this work has shown she did make alliances to put an end to child cruelty and campaign for greater opportunities for working-class children and girls in particular. She worked closely with Elizabeth Surr on this and the two remained friends after their school board careers were over. She could work collaboratively. Her early life, as referred to previously, had made her wary of people. She told Emily Hill of the Moral Reform Union that ‘it took ten years to make a friend of a person.’⁹

So Helen had both positive aspects and negative defects in her character, as do all human beings, one weakness of hers being that she saw everything in black and white with no shades in between, which led to conflict with those who may have compromised on the School Board or in the women’s suffrage groups. Yes, she was an exacting person to work with, and this must have tried the patience of colleagues many times, but she had a sense of morality based on social justice for ordinary people, men and women. Her friend in the Moral Reform Union, Emily Hill, wrote a candid, honest obituary of her for the *English Women’s Review*:

⁹ Emily Hill to Helen Taylor, 5 November 1895, MTC file 10, no. 43.

A rare and striking personality. Mentally and morally she was on grand lines...Her love of truth and justice and hatred of oppression amounted to a passion. Compromise she could neither tolerate nor understand. She used to say of herself that she had no tact. What she seemed to fail to recognise was that life could not be lived on principles of pure logic. Everything Miss Taylor, did, said or wrote had an air of distinction and individuality. She was a formidable antagonist.¹⁰

It is a fitting tribute, revealing the strengths and weaknesses of a remarkable woman.

She was not perfect, she had weaknesses, but she made up for them in her strengths.

However, although she could drive people to distraction through her rigidity, she can be lauded for a devotion to principle which led her to be truly independent on the School Board rather than blindly party political. Her friend F.W. Soutter assessed her educational career and concluded that it

...was marked by earnest attention to the exacting duties of the office, an exceeding plainness of speech and a resolute obliteration of the ordinary party political bonds.¹¹

Helen faded from public life in the 1890s after she ended her involvement in the Moral Reform Union. Even by 1890 the press commented that she was no longer on the political and social scene as she had been. 'Miss Helen Taylor who up to a year or two ago was one of the foremost political women in London ...but who now seldom appears on a public platform.'¹² A correspondent in 1900 wrote 'you seem to have retired so completely from all connection with public life.'¹³ Her niece Mary Taylor, who looked after her for the last four years of her life, recounts her aunt's mental decline and confusion during her last years in a diary which is in the Mill Taylor Collection. The once formidable speaker and antagonist spent her time shuffling amongst the leaves in her Avignon garden and having night terrors. She

¹⁰Press cutting of Emily Hill's obituary of Helen Taylor taken from *Women and Progress*, 8 February 1907, MTC, box 7.

¹¹ Soutter, *Recollections of a Labour Pioneer*, p.86.

¹² *Leeds Mercury*, 28 June 1890.

¹³ Christina A Bremner to Helen Taylor, 4 February 1900, MTC, file 4, no 49.

became increasingly mentally frustrated, unable to remember the present but reliving past campaigns to an increasingly exasperated niece who found her daily tantrums, amnesia and the personal care she needed hard to cope with. Mary persuaded her to return to England for the last two years of her life, where she lived in Torquay and, according to the diary, found some peace and contentment, taking trips round the area in an omnibus, which she greatly enjoyed, and by the seaside.

Helen died in Torquay on 29 January 1907 and with her passed another link with the old world of land reform which John Stuart Mill had been so integral to.¹⁴ She had provided continuity with a radical Liberal past in the changing world of reform which was now increasingly led at the beginning of the twentieth century by the tenants of Marxism or Christian Socialism, influencing the newly formed Labour Party. Opportunities in work and education for women had expanded since the days of her youth, again making hers a bygone world. Helen had been lauded during the 1880s for her relationship to the most respected political economist of the Victorian era but by the time of her death his star was in the descendant. The Lancashire Post was prescient in labelling Helen 'of her time.' Her rapid disappearance from the historiography was partly because she was a character of a certain time and place and of campaigns many of which did not endure. A new generation of men and women had begun in the 1880s and 1890s to challenge the sexual and social mores and the mind-set of their parents and grandparents. Men and women were meeting together in the 1880s to discuss the relationship between the sexes as invited members of Karl Pearson's Men and Women's Club. The women were attracted to the club as a way of forging a new sexual morality. These women included

¹⁴ The Secretary of the Land Nationalisation Society, an old friend and colleague of Helen's, Joseph Hyder, wrote to Mary Taylor after her aunt's death: 'Her death snaps another link with the past': Joseph Hyder to Mary Taylor, MTC, file 29, no. 297.

Henrietta Muller, Helen's School Board colleague, and Olive Schreiner, with whom Helen worked closely in the Social Democratic Federation. Guests of the Men and Women's Club included Annie Besant, Elizabeth Blackwell and Eleanor Marx.¹⁵ There is no evidence of any interest in such matters on Helen's part, that she was ever invited or that she befriended the younger women, such as Olive Schreiner and Eleanor Marx, her political colleagues.¹⁶

The 'new women' like Olive and her friend Eleanor are examples of a younger generation interested in exploring new ways of living and calling for more openness in sexual matters.¹⁷ As has been emphasised throughout this work, Helen saw it as her life's work to promote the teachings of John Stuart Mill and keep his memory alive. However, his general reputation and political importance were fading and the Helen would have cut a very old-fashioned figure towards the end of her life. The decline in respect for Mill's philosophy, so dear to Helen, was illustrated in a comment made by Olive Schreiner concerning the antagonism of the new generation of socialists to the philosophy of Mill. Olive did hold Mill in high esteem and was horrified herself at the challenges to his reputation towards the latter part of the Victorian era. She wrote in a letter of her concern in 1892:

I am conscious of owing a profound and unending debt to John Stuart Mill; when I got home to Europe and found men and women whose views coincided with indifference to his works or ridiculing them as old fashioned, it was keenly painful to me.¹⁸

¹⁵ See Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, chapter 1.

¹⁶ Eleanor Marx letters, Amsterdam Institute for Social Research, and Olive Schreiner letters, <http://www.oliveschreiner.org>. Eleanor Marx's letters in the Amsterdam archive contain none between her and Helen and only one reference to Helen in any letter. Olive Schreiner's letters, now published as an online archive, reveal only one reference to Helen and no letters between them.

¹⁷ Rowbotham, *Edward Carpenter, A Life of Liberty and Love*.

¹⁸ Olive Schreiner to Rev. J.T. Lloyd, 29 October 1892 in E.R. Rive, *Olive Schreiner Letters 1871-99, Vol. 1* (Oxford, 1988) p. 212.

Such disrespect from the next generation, who were forging a political identity owing its ideology to Marxist or Christian socialism, must have been exceedingly painful to Helen and certainly depicts her clearly as an old-fashioned lady from a previous radical generation. Many of those ridiculing her step-father would have found her equally ridiculous, as she never wavered in believing her life's work to be that of promoting his. This is probably one of the reasons why she is not remembered. She was of her time, unlike, for example, Annie Besant, who embraced Indian nationalism and worked with Ghandi and feels more relevant to today's history writers. Neither was Helen one of those women suffragists who lived to see women suffrage granted, which gave them an enduring place in the historiography, like Millicent Fawcett, nor a trade unionist like Eva Gore-Booth in Manchester, who is remembered in the historiography of trade unionism, and whose life and work are still of great historical interest for research topics today.

Helen's causes, such as land reform and moral reform, died with her, as did the political ideology of her step-father which had informed them. Land as a politically important question faded with the First World War. She did not live to see her feminism victorious in the granting of women's suffrage and thus have her name included in its historiography. None of her other causes endured. The school boards were superseded by the county councils; the London School Board was dissolved in 1903, when the London County Council took over the running of the capital's state school system. Although she had championed such 'modern' relevant campaigns such as equal pay for women, equality in the classroom for women teachers and girl pupils and an end to corporal punishment, the demise of the school boards led to a lack of continuity in the campaigns for these causes. The school boards' women

members were forgotten until recently. The Liberal Party itself, with which Helen had had such a strained relationship, had a final flowering in the early twentieth century with the introduction of pensions for all, but it too faded away soon after Helen's death, when the working class attached its allegiance to the new Labour Party after the First World War.

Helen, unlike her old Ladies' Land League colleague Jennie Wyse Powell, did not evolve as a political activist. Wyse Powell adapted her political involvement to include playing her part in the Easter Rising and the Irish Free State, and straddled the old and new ways. Seismic events kept her feminism alive during changing and challenging political times. For example, Wyse Power continued her involvement in Irish nationalism, which was reopened to women with the creation of the Daughters of Erin in 1900. She became one of this organisation's vice presidents and later became a senator in the Irish Free State. Wyse Power was young enough to evolve politically and play a role in a very altered world from her youth, progressing through the Land League, the Daughters of Erin, Cumann na mBan and Sinn Féin and even joined Fianna Fáil in later life. Helen's political identity, however, had been forged mid-nineteenth century and it stayed there. Helen's demise in the historiography might not have been so drastic if old age and ill-health had not stopped her playing a part in the changing world of the 1890s. However, nothing which has been demonstrated about her motivation and aims in this thesis indicates that she was flexible enough to change from the inheritance bestowed on her by a long working and familial relationship with Mill. The evidence is that she would not have embraced the modern age. She refused to change her morals to accept Eleanor Marx and Elizabeth Elmy's free unions. The Socialist League's promotion of armed

revolution caused her to turn her back on it. She was against all violence, so she would almost certainly not have supported the militant suffragettes or the 1916 Easter Rising in Ireland. But this is conjecture and does not take away from why she should be remembered in the historiography.

Helen, crucially, left little in the way of writing which could have kept her memory alive, unlike Annie Besant. It is often the case that those who leave a large literary legacy, which can be mined by researchers, receive the most attention in the historiography. For example Tom Clark, of much more importance to the Easter Rising of 1916 than James Connolly has been written about much less frequently. The great interest in Connolly is in no small part due to the large volume of writing he left for posterity. Clark, in contrast, has left little for researchers.¹⁹ Helen left only a small number of pamphlets on land reform, the need for women's morality in public life and her views on Ireland. Her most enduring writing is her 1867 discourse on women's suffrage, *The Claim of Englishwomen to the Suffrage Constitutionally Considered*. Neither was she a prolific letter writer. She was constantly apologising to correspondents for her tardiness of reply. She did not describe the great movements of the day in detail in her letters or major political players in great depth. Consequently her correspondence is cited sparsely in the biographies of the important political personages with whom she mixed. Her strength was her speeches and her performance on the platforms at meetings. She drew large audiences but the memory of her public speaking died with her generation in an age before sound archiving and the advent of film.

¹⁹ Thanks to Jonathan Moore for discussing this and his observations which I have quoted.

Examining the life of Helen Taylor illustrates that women, far from being marginal historical characters, played important executive roles in political groups in the Victorian era and that they had political agency. This analysis also makes a further challenge to those histories in which ‘women are fleeting actors in the pages of the book.’²⁰ Men and women **together** formed the political organisations of the later years of Victoria’s reign. **Together** they built the new compulsory state education system through the elected school boards; they challenged British rule and landlordism in Ireland; they campaigned for land reform throughout the United Kingdom; they formed new political parties as in the Social Democratic Federation, and they fought for greater democracy for both men and women, through support for women’s suffrage and greater working-class involvement in politics.

The women’s involvement, this work has shown, was often contested and only a small section of socially privileged women were able to negotiate the separate spheres ideology; but the fact that some women did take their place in politics and social reform as equals to men is worthy of historical record. These women worked hard to improve the opportunities for ordinary working people. They led, as did Helen, ‘strenuous and self-sacrificing’ lives.²¹ They sat on school boards, contested patriarchal practices and demanded to be treated as equals. They demanded the vote for women, better educational and work opportunities for girls, women and the working class in general, and greater involvement in society by women as their right. They maintained that it was a woman’s moral duty to democracy to take an active role in society. Women like Helen appealed to their less privileged sisters to

²⁰ Joan Wallace Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York 1999), p. 76. Scott makes this comment on E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963)

²¹ Soutter, *Recollections of a Labour Pioneer*, p. 98, where he records that Helen’s grave was inscribed ‘a strenuous and self-sacrificing life.’

become involved in politics, whether it was through support for land reform or in the education of their children. This study of Helen Taylor is part of a now forty year old tradition of historians of women 'putting women back into the historical picture, recognising and celebrating women's achievements which had been lost through the male domination of historical writing.'²²

Helen's beliefs and practices demonstrate that not all Victorian feminists were necessarily imperialist. This thesis has demonstrated that Helen's feminism was often at variance with that of the mainstream British women's rights movement, in particular over Ireland, land nationalisation and her socialism. Antoinette Burton's claim, in her seminal work *Burdens of History*, that British feminists *per se* had an imperial world view from 1860 onwards, is challenged by this thesis.²³ Several forms of feminism existed. Burton ignores Helen except to quote her as an example of orientalism because, in her essay *The Claim of English Women to the Suffrage Constitutionally Considered*, Helen compared the exclusion of British women from the suffrage to confining women to harems.²⁴ Helen was using the language and imagery of the time and cannot be expected to have had our own politically aware postcolonial language. It is too much to use her as an example of imperial feminism because of her choice of words and the use of a metaphor to make her meaning understood by contemporary readers. This thesis has shown Helen to be at variance with imperial feminism and that she was often criticised openly by her contemporary suffragists for bringing the movement into disrepute through the nature of her chosen campaigns.

²² Catherine Hall, *White Male and Middle Class*, p. 8.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 62.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 88.

Likewise Burton gives Jessie Craigen as an example of a feminist who had pride in the imperial project because of a speech she made at the woman's suffrage meeting in Manchester in 1880. Jessie spoke of 'the clock of Empire' being 'heard from Westminster all round the World', which quotation Burton uses to illustrate her theory that imperialism and feminism were intertwined and mutually constructed.²⁵ This is a misunderstanding of Jessie, who was a member of the Land League and the Social Democratic Party and who wrote that the English working class were not responsible for what had happened in Ireland under British rule and had much in common with the oppressed Irish:

We have been ourselves betrayed and oppressed by the ruling classes, who have not done quite such bad things in England as in Ireland – only because they have not dared.²⁶

Jessie, therefore, was critical of the political system at the heart of empire and should not be labelled as imperialist because she used a language and vocabulary common at the time. She lived in the largest empire the world had ever seen; her language could not ignore it. Burton uses a further example of language to argue that British feminists were confident in their belief in the superiority of their imperial race when she quotes the feminist Mabel Sharman Crawford in 1890 labelling the Ladies' Gallery in the House of Commons as a 'purdah curtain' Burton cites this as an example of the white woman's sense of superiority and thus support for the civilising effects of empire. Again, it is not advisable to focus simply on language as proof of imperialist beliefs that all British feminists of the Victorian era were imperialist. Such imagery, used for the Ladies' Gallery, was common currency.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

²⁶ Jessie Craigen, *Irish Police and Home Rule*, (London, 1886). Pamphlet published by the author.

The fiercely anti-imperialist Irish feminist Anna Parnell whose *Tale of a Great Sham* was a tirade of abuse against the British and their imperial ways, had written about the Ladies' Gallery in 1880 for the Irish-American publication *The Celtic Monthly*. She also likened it to a harem in denoting it **as** a place for the 'imprisonment and seclusion of women.'²⁷ An historian would be a long time searching for the evidence that Anna based her feminism on a belief in the necessity of the British Empire. Her anti-British, anti-imperialist poetry has been cited earlier in this work. Burton too often describes British Victorian feminists as a homogenous group when it would be more correct to qualify her statements with the words 'the majority' or the 'mainstream' in regard to the movement. She totally ignores the anti-imperialist Annie Besant and excludes her from her study because 'she was not in Britain permanently after 1885 and was not part of the leadership.'²⁸ No indeed: Besant was in India, where she turned to Indian nationalism against the British, but she cannot be ignored in a study of British feminists, since she too is evidence of a plurality of views and stances. Much more research needs to be done to examine the variety of feminisms within Great Britain and Ireland during the nineteenth century, though some historians have challenged the view that there was one feminism, which strongly asserted the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race. Margaret Ward has made an examination of the anti-imperialist feminism found in the Irish women nationalists of the Ladies' Land League and acknowledges in passing the anti-imperial feminism of Englishwomen like Helen and Jessie Craigen in their support for the Ladies' Land League.²⁹ Nancy Paxton has written on the resistance to imperialism of Annie Besant, while Vron Ware has written on the complex nature of

²⁷ *The Celtic Monthly*, May 1880, p. 118.

²⁸ Burton, *Burdens of History*, p. 26.

²⁹ Margaret Ward, 'Gendering the Union: Imperial Feminism and the Ladies' Land League,' *Women's History Review*, vol. 10, No 1, 2001, p.82.

British nineteenth-century feminism and called for other forms of feminism to be explored, for example that of Olive Schreiner and Annie Besant.³⁰

Helen is part of this much needed alternative study of feminisms and this thesis has shown her importance as a woman whose feminism was often at variance with that of her fellow countrywomen. She supported the rights of the Irish Catholics to run their own affairs; she supported the rights of the English working class, both men and women, to advance in society through merit. On the London School Board she worked for working-class children to be able to succeed through a curriculum which would equip them to have a place in society only limited by their intelligence. She called for all land to be nationalised through her work with land reforming groups to end the privileges of the landed few over the landless many. She wanted powerful changes in society at the heart of Empire. She was internationalist in outlook and worked and formed friendships with those who were fiercely against the British Empire. She worked closely with Anna Parnell and corresponded with Patrick Ford, editor of the *Irish World*; her friend Henry George was sent to Ireland as the paper's correspondent. Patrick Ford saw the Land War as a blow to the British Empire and was a supporter of trade unionism and socialist and communist ideas.³¹ Like many Liberal anti-imperialists, Helen opposed the invasion of Egypt by Britain in 1882 and spoke of British tyranny in Ireland as the worst against democracy existing in the world except in Turkey. It has further been illustrated that whilst the feminist periodical the *English Women's Review*, was applauding the bravery of Anglo-Irish women landowners during the Land War against the aggression of Irish land

³⁰ Nancy L Paxton, 'Complicity and Resistance in the writings of Annie Steel and Annie Besant,' N Chaudhuri & Margaret Strobel, (eds.), *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, (Bloomington 1992), pp. 158-176 and Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale*, (London, 1992).

³¹ James P Rodechko, 'An Irish- American Journalist and Catholicism, Patrick Ford of the Irish World,' *Church History*, vol. 39, no 4, December 1970, (Cambridge, 1970), pp. 524-540.

leaguers, Helen was in Ireland physically erecting land league huts to house the aggressors and discussing her problems with her fellow English feminists and Anna Parnell. It has also been revealed how Helen sent money to the persecuted Marxists in Germany and had an internationalist outlook through living in France and having close friends, the Georges, in America. Helen's life work is testimony to the fact that not all British feminists were working to uphold imperial values or speak for Indian women as they did for the working class. Burton uses British feminist support for the abolition of the Contagious Diseases Act as a further example of British feminist superiority in looking after the concerns of their inferior Indian sisters; but this study has been able to adduce no evidence that this was Helen's view. Her work in the Moral Reform Union and its campaigns to repeal the Acts in India was more a continuation of work begun with her step-father against the Acts in Britain. They were morally wrong in Helen's eyes wherever they were enacted.

This work has had as its aim and scope of study an examination of the contribution of Helen Taylor to the social and political life of Victorian Britain and Ireland. Throughout, her feminism has been seen to be integral to her involvement in campaigns and causes. This thesis has been intended to enhance the understanding of women's considerable involvement in Victorian public life, despite the existence of a middle-class separate spheres ideology. It has shown how women campaigners were not a homogenous group and should not be regarded as such. It has challenged those commentators who have sought to reduce Helen to a strident divisive personality by its recognition of the success of her work on the London School Board and for the oppressed in society, be they English, German or Irish, through her various political campaigns. Although she never wavered from a belief in the

rightness of John Stuart Mill's political philosophy she deserves to be known for being more than 'the step-daughter of John Stuart Mill'. Helen Taylor achieved much in her own right in her chosen causes. Only old age and ill-health ended her involvement in a public life which she had dedicated to winning for working-class men and women alike full democratic rights, a decent education and a moral entitlement to the land and resources of the country of their birth.

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