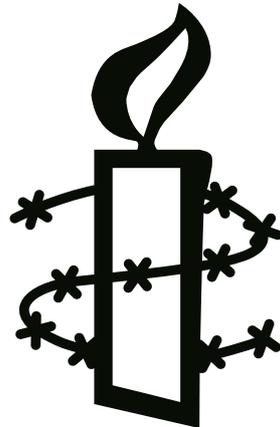


# **Not Just Wilberforce**

## ***Champions of Human Rights in Hull and East Yorkshire***



*essays for Amnesty International*

***Edited by Ekkehard Kopp and Cecile Oxaal***



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## Foreword

This book is about freedom and Hull. Its contributors have all been variously embedded in the cultural, intellectual and political life of the city over many years: they know of what they speak.

Freedom—unlike poetry and prose—does not just happen anywhere. Indeed, it is the case that, although men may be born free, they are too often in chains. Freedom has to be won, sustained and protected. It is always at risk, the fact as well as the word.

The argument of this irresistible volume is that, as a city and area, Hull has a proud and distinctive history of resisting forms of oppression, of using an angular independence of thought to challenge the orthodox and of fighting for principles and practical change.

Why should this be so? The introduction suggests that it may have had something to do with Hull's relative isolation and the space it affords for thought. Today isolation is something of a fiction. Motorways, train connections, airports easily dispel the myth. But Douglas Dunn, a distinguished poet whose skills were honed in the city, makes a telling point: 'Like most cities built on the bank of an estuary, Hull has a marginal, provisional, almost frontier quality'. Being marginal allows untrammelled thinking; being provisional implies fluidity, flexibility and a refusal of fixed dogma; and being frontier suggests the pioneering spirit so obvious in Hull's past, the courage to go beyond.

So let us not pretend that Hull is geographically mainstream. It isn't and that is its glory.

As 2017 approaches, we need to revel in the city's difference and its hidden riches. In 1982, Genny Rahtz, another Hull-based poet, wrote:

So attend this subdued city  
Providing for its livelihood  
Not its looks,  
And keep what you find secret  
From all obliterating praise.

Whilst it is not difficult to understand this affectionate cradling of her workaday, unpretentious Hull, now is the time for the city to reveal its secrets. This book is a step out of the shadows—and the praise that it deserves to receive will not obliterate but confirm the area's uniqueness and will acknowledge its proud contribution over the centuries to the cause of freedom and all those universal ideals promoted so tirelessly by Amnesty International UK.

**Graham Chesters**

*Chair, Hull Freedom Festival Board*



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## Introduction

Philip Larkin famously described Hull as ‘a city that is in the world yet sufficiently on the edge of it to have a different resonance’; a place whose relative isolation, together with a turbulent, if less well-known, history, allows individuals space to form their own views, neither bound by tradition nor distracted by fashion. His verdict, ‘a place cannot produce poems: it can only not prevent them, and Hull is good at that. It neither impresses nor insists’, is equally fitting as a description of factors that foster independence of thought and its expression in social and political action.

What we now call human rights have been won from the powers of church and state by the struggles of people all over the world. These human rights were codified in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Its drafters drew on the main principles of many religions and on secular philosophical discourses about what constitutes natural justice and freedom. Among those who fought for human rights were some whose words and deeds stood out in defining the aims of the struggle.

William Wilberforce is rightly treasured as a favourite son of Hull for his role in leading the long parliamentary campaign to abolish the slave trade more than 200 years ago. Arguably however, in the collective memory his fame has eclipsed that of others from Hull and East Yorkshire, whose writings and actions in the defence of human freedom and dignity deserve similar attention and local pride.

This small volume seeks to redress some of this imbalance by telling the stories of eight of these individuals (or families) with strong local connections. In their time their influence was felt well beyond these shores, and it deserves to be celebrated more widely than it is today. Our list is by no means exhaustive. It provides a representative sample that illustrates the freedom of spirit and action shown by people from or active in our region.

The lives of our eight individuals cover well over four centuries, during which British society was to undergo many fundamental changes, but clear threads can be traced throughout in the preoccupations of our human rights champions, and the religious or secular principles that inspired them.

## Principled opposition to abuses of state power

*John Walworth* and *James Rochester*, two monks imprisoned in the Hull Charterhouse in 1536, sought freedom to observe their religion (Catholicism) in the face of an Established Church forced upon them by Henry VIII;

*John* and *Matthew Alured* opposed abuses of royal power by Charles I, fighting in the English Civil Wars (1642-51) for a sovereign democratic Parliament, with Matthew turning on Oliver Cromwell whom, as Lord Protector, he saw as betraying that ideal;

*Mary Wollstonecraft* (1759-1797), insisted that democratic principles underpinning the French Revolution should lead to independence and social justice for women;

*Thomas Peronnet Thompson* and *George Cookman*, supporting the Great Reform Act of 1832, maintained that Parliament should establish fully universal voting rights;

*Mary Murdoch* (1864-1918), as Hull's first female GP, exposed health inequalities in the region, challenging neglect of the poor by the local health authorities of her time;

*Winifred Holtby* (1898-1935) opposed armed conflict and actively sought to promote world peace through the League of Nations and at pacifist rallies after World War I;

*Lillian Bilocca* (1929-1988) challenged trawler owners and the Wilson Government in 1968 in a direct action campaign to highlight the owners' shameful neglect of trawlermen's safety and the poor working conditions on Hull trawlers.

## **Opposing slavery in all its forms**

From 1800 onward, the abolitionist movement gained substantial impetus from

*Thomas Peronnet Thompson*, as Governor of Sierra Leone, in striving to improve conditions for freed slaves; later seeking to end the slave trade in the Persian Gulf;

*the younger Cookmans (George Grimston and Alfred)*, both prominent in the drive to abolish slavery in the USA;

*whilst parallels with slavery were rightly drawn by*

*Mary Wollstonecraft*, arguing strongly that subjugation of women is a form of slavery;

*Winifred Holtby*, exposing the working conditions of black miners in South Africa as akin to slavery and fighting for an effective trade union;

## **Women's rights**

*Mary Wollstonecraft's* advocacy of women's rights has greatly influenced progressive opinion for the past two centuries;

*Thomas Peronnet Thompson* consistently supported votes for women, despite it causing rifts with some former friends;

*Mary Murdoch* was a leading force in fighting for votes for women throughout her life; its first major Parliamentary success came just two years after her death;

*Winifred Holtby* saw votes for women become a partial reality during her twenties and pressed for women's rights, mutual respect, peace and democracy all her life;

*Lillian Bilocca's* 1968 showed local women how effective women's collective direct action can be in mobilising public opinion against injustice.

## **Making a stand**

While social and economic conditions changed beyond recognition between 1536 and 1968, all the human rights champions celebrated in this volume share personal characteristics that led them to make a stand for human dignity, justice and compassion wherever this was denied by the societies in which they lived.

Prominent among these are determination, courage, commitment and perseverance: our champions were not to be deterred from the actions they considered necessary to highlight injustice, irrespective of the personal danger or social rejection this might entail for them, nor were they discouraged by the setbacks and obstacles they encountered or by initial failure. Their actions were marked by selflessness, honesty and consistency. The firm principles underpinning their conduct were based on clear concepts of the primacy of human dignity, of personal liberty, of freedom of speech, of compassion for their fellows and of the power of reasoned argument.

The same principles underpin Amnesty International's robust defence of human rights wherever these are threatened: whether by despots, authoritarian or corrupt regimes, by discrimination and inequality, by xenophobia, tribal hatred and wilful ignorance, or by exploitation of the weak by the strong. In highlighting the words and deeds of past champions of human rights from our own region, we hope that these examples will encourage modern readers to remain vigilant and active in speaking out against injustice and in opposing oppression and exploitation in all its forms. Only if we value our common humanity, mutual understanding and compassion more highly than sectional interests can we hope to realise the ideals of these role models in building a more tolerant, compassionate, just and equal society.

In this edition for schools we have adapted the original articles to make them more easily accessible, relying less on background knowledge in British history and modifying the language used. We have provided a brief glossary of less familiar terms at the end of each chapter and added subject headings where appropriate. We hope that teachers and students will find the material of interest and that it will persuade students to take pride in and be inspired by the honourable part their city and region have played in the pursuit of justice, fairness and mutual tolerance.

Ekkehard Kopp and Cecile Oxaal (Editors), Hull, April 2014

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Our contributors generously provided their time and expertise and, despite vague instructions and tight deadlines, delivered their articles promptly. We are grateful to Professor Michael Turner (Appalachian State University, North Carolina) for his expert advice on the chapter about Thomas Perronet Thompson, to Kath Beal for providing valuable material on, as well as illustrations of, Thompson's life and career, and to Gertrud Aub-Buscher and Lance Boanas, for assisting us with copy-editing and for providing sound and valuable advice. Thanks are due to Nicky Parker at Amnesty International UK for her help and advice and to Joy Gledhill of Kall Kwik (Hull) for handling the production of this volume with efficiency, patience and good humour.

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## **Hull Amnesty Group**

Meetings are held at 7 pm on the last Thursday of every month at the Zoo Cafe (off Newland Avenue, opposite Goddard Avenue). Everyone is welcome.

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# White Rose is dead....

Patrick J Doyle

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## The de la Pole family

The Hull Charterhouse, with its neighbouring 'hospital', the Maison Dieu (House of God), founded by Michael de la Pole in 1384, stood amidst fields on the west bank of the River Hull, a short distance from the walled town of Kingston upon Hull. Michael's father, William de la Pole (d. 1366), a prominent wool merchant and moneylender to Edward III, was said to have been '*second to no other merchant of England*'. He had served as Chief Baron of the Exchequer and become the first Mayor of Kingston upon Hull in 1332. Michael, who also served as Lord Chancellor of England (1383-86) to Richard II, gained the title of 1st Earl of Suffolk (1385), having inherited the valuable East Anglian estates of his wife, ten years earlier.



Fig 1.1

Statue of William de la Pole  
(Victoria Pier, Hull)

By courtesy of Kingston upon Hull City Council



Fig 1.2

Michael de la Pole  
(Guildhall, Hull)

By courtesy of Kingston upon Hull City Council

The de la Poles rose from the ranks of successful merchants to become princes, and their palace in Hull stood on the site of the former General Post Office, opposite St Mary's Church, in Lowgate. By the early sixteenth century the family had married into royalty: Elizabeth of York, sister of Edward IV and Richard III, wed John de la Pole, bearing him seven sons, cousins of Henry VIII. One son died young, two others became priests. The fates of the other four provide a grim summary of the family's rapid downfall following the Wars of the Roses (1455-1487).

## Rapid decline

The eldest, John, had been named by Richard III as his successor, shortly before Richard's defeat at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485. At first, John submitted to the victor, now crowned as Henry VII but, in May 1487, he fled to Ireland to join the 'Lambert Simnel Rebellion' (supposedly supporting the claim to the throne by the young impostor Lambert Simnel). The rebellion was suppressed by Henry in 1487 in a battle in which John lost his life.

John's brother Edmund succeeded him as Duke of Suffolk, but was demoted to Earl in 1493 and fled abroad in 1501. However, in 1506 he was handed over to Henry by the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I in return for the latter's son, Philip, who had been held prisoner by Henry VII. Despite Henry's promise to spare his life, Edmund was executed in 1513, early in the reign of Henry VIII.

When Edmund fled in 1501, his younger brother William was regarded by Henry VII as a threat to his throne and was imprisoned in the Tower of London from 1501, longer than anyone else, until his death in 1539. Upon Edmund's death the youngest brother Richard, who had also found sanctuary abroad, inherited the Suffolk title, remained abroad and, in his pursuit of the English crown, formed alliances with two successive French kings.

Thus the de la Pole family, despite their origins as merchants, were rightly considered by the Tudors as the real threat to their throne.



Fig 1.3

14th century drawing of the walled city of Hull, with Charterhouse at top middle, just outside the city walls.

By courtesy of Rev Stephen Deas,  
Master of Hull Charterhouse.

The Hull Charterhouse (the English name for a Carthusian monastery) was initially established to house thirteen members of the Carthusian Order, an order of monks whose Rule (or constitution) emphasises silent contemplation. In 1525, while the Carthusians in Hull faithfully followed their Rule, at the Battle of Pavia, in Italy, the armies of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V routed those of Francis I, the French king. This proved a fateful result, both for the founding fathers of the Hull Charterhouse and eventually for the institution itself. One wonders what were the reactions in Hull to the news of the battle. In all probability they were very different from those of their monarch. Henry VIII was delighted. After enquiring of the bearer of the news about the fate of the French king, he asked '*and Richard de la Pole?*' The reply came '*... the White Rose is dead in battle...I saw him dead with the others.*' To which Henry exclaimed: '*God have mercy on his soul, all the enemies of England are gone*'—adding, '*Give him [the herald] more wine.*'

One suspects the Carthusians would at least have said a De Profundis (a penitential psalm that is sung in commemoration of the dead) for Richard de la Pole, but his death dashed any hopes of a Hull-based royal dynasty, as he and his brothers had

no children.

However, this did not prevent Henry's continual purge of all Yorkists. As late as 1541 the aged Countess of Salisbury, widow of Richard Pole (a great-nephew of Richard III), was executed simply for being the mother of Cardinal Reginald Pole. Her son, at first favoured by Henry, had refused to support the King's attempts to obtain an annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon and to disinherit their daughter Mary. Their final break came when, from abroad, he sent Henry a lengthy treatise denouncing the 1534 Royal Supremacy Act of Parliament that had declared Henry as the only supreme '*head on earth of the Church of England*'.

## Henry VIII and the Charterhouse

As a result of the Battle of Pavia, Charles V's power was very great. In 1530 he became the last Holy Roman Emperor to be crowned by a pope. In these circumstances the possibility of any pope, even if he had wished to, declaring the marriage of the Emperor's aunt, Catherine of Aragon, to Henry VIII invalid was most unlikely, and the thought of his half-Spanish cousin Mary, being declared a bastard, impossible.

Henry's response to his marriage difficulties was to have a devastating impact upon all monastic communities, including the Hull Charterhouse. Henry's break from the Roman Catholic Church led, under his Lord Chancellor, Thomas Cromwell, to the Dissolution of the Monasteries. Between 1536 and 1540, over 800 monasteries were broken up and their assets taken over by the Crown. Henry was opposed in various quarters, most notably in the 1536 Yorkshire uprising by the 'Pilgrims of Grace', led by Robert Aske (of Aughton near Selby). The uprising combined economic, political and religious grievances. Aske's forces occupied York, returning expelled monks

and nuns to their Houses. The rebellion failed after Aske had trusted assurances from Henry's envoy, the Duke of Norfolk, that were never honoured. Aske, along with many rebels, was later executed.

The Carthusians were a strict Order, combining the lifestyle of a hermit with a mediaeval monastic Rule and liturgy. In England there were nine Houses, and they were held in the highest regard. At the Dissolution of the Monasteries, the Hull Charterhouse should, as a lesser monastery with an annual income below £200, have been abolished in 1536 but, significantly, it was spared on the petition of local notables. The Yorkshire Commissioners wrote to Cromwell that the Hull Carthusians were '*well favoured and commended by the honest men of Hull for their good living and great hospitality*'. This was only a brief respite. Although, under the influence of Archbishop Lee of York, the monks had submitted to Royal Supremacy and remained neutral during a siege of Hull by the Pilgrims of Grace, their House was suppressed in 1539, although not before one very significant event.

## Resistance and execution

The London Charterhouse had refused to accept the king's claims. As Dom David Knowles so eloquently wrote, '*when bishops and theologians paltered [sic] or denied, they were not ashamed to confess the Son of Man. They died faithful witnesses to the Catholic teaching that Christ had built his Church upon a Rock.*' Two of the London monks, John Rochester and James Walworth, were sent to Hull, in effect under house arrest as prisoners of conscience, where they continued to deny Royal Supremacy.



Fig 1.4

Plaque at Hull Charterhouse commemorating the Carthusian martyrs.

From the Hull Charterhouse, Rochester naively wrote to the Duke of Norfolk, begging for an opportunity to address the king in person, in order to argue that Supremacy was against the laws of God, the Catholic Faith and the health of His Majesty's body and soul. The cynical Duke, busy in his double-dealings with Robert Aske and the other Pilgrim leaders, passed the note to Thomas Cromwell, commenting, *'I believe he is one of the most arrant traitors of all the others that I have heard of'*. Eventually, he made use of a court at York, which was dealing with the Pilgrims, to have the two London Carthusians executed.

The deaths of these men, temporarily resident in Hull, along with those of John Houghton, Prior of London, and other Carthusian monks, sent shock waves throughout Catholic Europe. The wilful butchery of monks for their honestly held theological opinions by a Christian king whom a pope had honoured with the title 'Defender of the Faith' was unbelievable. The book *The Tudor Age*, by Dom David Knowles, has as its frontispiece a portrait of Houghton, by the Spanish artist Zurbarán. In Granada, Spain, there is a huge painting of the London Carthusians being dragged on hurdles to their place of execution.

Hull played a small part in this story, but an honourable one nevertheless. It

echoes all the themes familiar to Amnesty International: persecution of refugees and exiles, purges, house arrest, betrayal, and summary execution. The stance taken by the monks in defence of religious freedom mirrors the courage shown by later defenders of basic human rights, religious and political tolerance and the defence of human dignity.

## Aftermath

The story did not quite end with the upheavals of 1536-39. Henry's named successor, Edward VI, died, aged fifteen, in 1553, to be succeeded by Mary I, whom Henry had tried to disinherit. She married Philip I of Spain and aimed to return England to the Church of Rome. She restored a number of Carthusian monasteries, including the substantial property at Sheen, in what is now the borough of Richmond, Surrey. There, a Hull Carthusian, Thomas Synderton, was active until 1558. In that year Mary was succeeded by her Protestant half-sister Elizabeth I, and Carthusian monasteries were once more suppressed. Synderton fled abroad, joining the Bruges Charterhouse. Another Hull Carthusian, William Remington, found refuge in Scotland at the Perth Charterhouse, although this, the only Carthusian house in Scotland, was also attacked in 1559. While John Bennet, with Hull connections, died as late as 1580 in the Roermond Charterhouse, in Holland, all signs are that, second time around, Hull men showed more resolve. For them, a 'white martyrdom'—concentration on their religious life—instead of bloody execution.

The Hospital for the Aged survived the turmoil. Originally it had been built for 'bedesmen' and women—in effect, as a residential home for the elderly, who had a duty to pray for the eternal rest of the de la Pole family. In the reign of Edward VI responsibility for the hospital was transferred to the Corporation of Hull, and it survives to this day.



Fig 1.5  
Remnant of mediaeval Charterhouse wall



Fig 1.6  
Hull Charterhouse entrance today

If you wish to visit a living Charterhouse, then travel to Parkminster, Sussex, the sole existing English Charterhouse. To view the unique layout of a Charterhouse with its individual cells and gardens, then journey to the site of Mount Grace, in North Yorkshire. For a tribute to these little-known martyrs, Rochester and Walworth, there is a blue plaque on the walls of the Hull Charterhouse. At least there the de la Pole legacy of a House of God where Hull's elderly can live and pray in tranquillity continues.

## Glossary

**annulment:** cancellation of a contract such as marriage.

**bastard:** a term used for children born outside marriage; if their father was the king, they had no rights to inherit the throne.

**Chief Baron to the Exchequer:** a judge who could preside over the 'equity court' used to settle (mainly financial) disputes on the principles of fairness, rather than through specific laws.

**Holy Roman Emperor:** the Holy Roman Empire began with Charlemagne in 800 AD, and survived until 1806, with some early interruptions. The Catholic rulers of several states of Europe elected one of their number as Emperor, who was to be crowned by the Pope (until 1530), and was regarded as the principal monarch of the Catholic states in Europe.

**Lambert Simnel Rebellion:** Henry VII's claim to the throne was disputed by a group including John de la Pole; they supported the claim made on behalf of a young boy, Lambert Simnel, who had been tutored by a Yorkist priest and was claimed to be the Earl of Warwick, Edward IV's nephew - he was probably seen as a figurehead, to be disposed of if the rebels had won.

**liturgy:** the traditional form of worship observed by a specific religious group.

**Lord Chancellor:** a senior office of state; formerly presiding over petitions to the King.

**Mary I:** The only child of Henry VIII and his first wife, Catherine of Arragon; like her mother a staunch Catholic. During her five-year reign some 280 Protestants were burnt at the stake for heresy, earning her the nickname 'Bloody Mary' among her opponents.

**treatise:** a (usually long, learned and detailed) written discussion of a specific subject.

**Tudors:** dynasty that ruled England from 1485 to 1603, including Henry VIII and Elizabeth I.

**Wars of the Roses:** civil wars in England from 1455 to 1487, between the houses of York (White Rose) and Lancaster (Red Rose), both descended from Edward III, for the English crown - ultimately won by Lancaster when Henry Tudor (Henry VII) defeated Richard III.

**Yorkists:** supporters of the House of York in the Wars of the Roses.

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# Matthew Alured MP: Parliamentary soldier and radical republican champion of Parliament

Robb Robinson

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## The English Civil Wars

The seventeenth century was a time of serious social, political and religious upheaval across Europe. There were many aspects to the long-term instability that accompanied this process. One crucial example of the crisis in the British Isles was the struggle between the monarchy and the Westminster parliament over who should govern the country. Parliament wished to restrict what many of its supporters saw as the authoritarian tendencies of the king, Charles I. In the 1640s the tensions erupted into a series of conflicts, now commonly called the English Civil Wars, across the British Isles. The world, as the inhabitants of the British Isles then knew it, was turned upside down. Regions, towns, villages and even families were divided between the Royalist and Parliamentarian sides, whose soldiers became known, respectively, as 'Cavaliers' and 'Roundheads'.

Some of the soldiers and ordinary people supporting the cause of Parliament were influenced by the Levellers. They were political radicals: they called for, amongst other things, religious tolerance, extension of the right to vote and a government or parliament answerable to the people. Their ideas were well ahead of their time and continued to influence later political opinions. A number of prominent people from eastern Yorkshire supported or sympathised with the Levellers' demands. These included Major-General Robert Overton, whose family came from Easington, and Admiral John Lawson, born in Scarborough and also strongly associated with Hull.

## The Alureds of Hull

Kingston upon Hull was closely involved in many aspects of these seventeenth-century struggles. It is well known that its citizens closed its gates to Charles I, a few months before the Civil War is generally considered to have started. A number of local Hull and East Yorkshire individuals, now largely forgotten, also played prominent roles in various aspects of these crises, none more so than Matthew Alured (1615-1694), a man who deserves much greater local and national recognition, and his elder brother John.

The Alured family were upper-class landowners who had settled in the Hull area during the sixteenth century. Generations of the family played their part in local, regional and national politics [8; p.7]. Thomas Alured, Matthew's great-grandfather, had been appointed paymaster of the Hull garrison and later became a Hull Customs Official. He became a Member of Parliament (MP) and Mayor. Matthew's grandfather, his uncle Thomas, and his brother John (1607-1651) also represented either Hull or neighbouring Hedon at one time or another [10].

The family home, just to the north of Hull's Town Walls, was a relatively large building which had been, before the Reformation, a religious house of the Carthusian Order, adjacent to the Old Charterhouse Hospital (see Chapter 1). Today, the Hull History Centre is built in part of what had been the Alured estate and gardens [4].

## **John Alured: Parliamentary soldier and 'Regicide'**

When John and Matthew's father Henry died in 1628, his estate was largely inherited by John. A few months later, John entered Gray's Inn, London, to join the legal profession. In 1631 he married Mary Darley and in 1640 he was elected MP for his late uncle Thomas's Hedon constituency for the Short Parliament (which sat for only three weeks in April and May 1640, before being dissolved by Charles I). John was again elected as one of the town's two MPs when the so-called Long Parliament convened in November of the same year. By this time he already had a record as a radical, having been reported to the Privy Council back in 1638 for declaring that the Scots '*would reform England by a Parliament as well as they have done theirs already.*' He had been released later on a bond of £2,000 [7; p.151].

During May 1642 John was a member of the committee sent by the Long Parliament to Hull to assist the Governor, Sir John Hotham, following his refusal in April to allow King Charles to enter the town. This event should rightly be regarded as the first open act of the subsequent Civil War. In this conflict John Alured saw a great deal of action. He was a colonel in the northern parliamentary army. He fought at Adwalton Moor, near Bradford, where the parliamentary army was defeated. He is generally also believed to have been at Marston Moor, west of York, considered a turning point in the military struggle. In arguably the largest battle ever fought on English soil, the parliamentary army gained control of the north of England. He was part of the group that Sir Thomas Fairfax took to London in February 1645 when he took up command of the New Model Army [10], with Oliver Cromwell as second-in-command.

By 1646, after the Battle of Naseby, Northamptonshire, Charles I saw that his cause was lost. He surrendered to a Scottish army, who sold him to the Parliamentarians for £400,000, in January 1647. He escaped imprisonment to wage a second campaign, having made a new agreement with Scottish forces, but despite this and a series of Royalist uprisings during 1648, his forces were again defeated by the Parliamentarians. This ended the Second Civil War. He was subsequently tried for treason.

In early January 1649 John Alured was appointed a commissioner for the trial of Charles I. He attended many meetings of the trial commission, including that of the 21<sup>st</sup> January when the verdict was announced. He was one of three East Riding people making up half of the Yorkshire commissioners who signed the King's death warrant [10; pp. 148-157]. John was to escape the later fate of many other 'Regicides', as he died in 1651.

## **Matthew Alured: soldier and champion of Parliament**

Like his elder brother John, Matthew Alured certainly played a significant part in the political and constitutional controversies of the seventeenth century. A consistent champion of the rights of Parliament, his life spanned much of the turbulent seventeenth century and yet his substantial role has been somewhat neglected in a number of local and national accounts of this period. Matthew was born in the family home in 1615. He was baptised in Sculcoates parish church which once stood in the atmospheric old churchyard that still lies by the busy corner of Air Street and Bankside, now a small bush-green oasis in the heart of the River Hull's industrial corridor.



Fig 2.1

Part of Sculcoates churchyard today  
(photo by courtesy of Mike Park)

At the time Matthew was growing up, Hull's future politician-poet, the young Andrew Marvell, was a neighbour. His father, Master of the Charterhouse, after being widowed, had married Matthew's aunt, Lucy Alured. Matthew's daughter Mary later married William Popple, Marvell's beloved nephew. There is evidence that Matthew Alured and Andrew Marvell remained lifelong friends despite their subsequently differing careers and political connections [3; pp.383-385].



Fig 2.2

Marvell plaque at Charterhouse, Hull



Fig 2.3

Mulberry tree where young Marvell is said to have composed his poems.

Matthew Alured made his entry into the festering national political controversies in 1642, the year he married Catherine Nelthorpe, when he joined with the Darleys and other Yorkshire families in petitioning for Charles to return to Westminster and cease 'illegally' raising troops.

Matthew rapidly made a name for himself as a parliamentary soldier. He began his army service as a Lieutenant of Horse in 1642, a few months before his first child Mary was christened at St Mary's, Hull, in January 1643 [3; p.384]. He took part in Sir Thomas Fairfax's attack on Wakefield, Yorkshire, in May 1643 and, although the attacking parliamentary forces were heavily outnumbered by the Royalist defenders, they overwhelmed their opponents. During the battle Matthew captured the Royalist army commander. Around 1,500 Royalist soldiers were taken prisoner in the action. A couple of months later Matthew saw action with his brother John when parliamentary forces had been defeated at Adwalton Moor. He was

undoubtedly amongst those who fought skirmishes and a rearguard action as they fell back to Barton on Humber, from where the remaining parliamentary forces were ferried to Hull.

## Hull under siege

Hull had, of course, been besieged unsuccessfully by Charles I in 1642 after he had been refused entry to the town. During the second siege of Hull, carried out by the Royalists in 1643, Sir Thomas Fairfax, commander of the parliamentary forces, heavily fortified the town's defences. Part of their preparations involved opening the sluices and destroying parts of the Humber Bank in order to flood the surrounding area. This led to the destruction of the buildings of the Charterhouse complex, the family home of the Alureds, and the neighbouring hospital, which were razed to the ground to prevent the Royalists using them as a forward attacking position.

During the subsequent siege the Royalists occupied the area around Sculcoates church, from where they bombarded the town. The Royalists stormed Hull's defences on 9<sup>th</sup> October, but the town held out and the defenders launched a counter-attack a couple of days later. On 12<sup>th</sup> October the Royalists finally abandoned the siege and withdrew to York. The Alured family's losses in the siege were later recognised by the House of Commons, who agreed to pay John £5,000 in compensation. The Charterhouse hospital buildings were later rebuilt but the Alured family home was never reconstructed.

In 1644 Matthew became a colonel in Ferdinando Lord Fairfax's Northern Army. During this stage of his military career he fought at Marston Moor and various other actions before his regiment was disbanded in February 1646. During the Second Civil War (1647-1648) he commanded an East Riding Militia regiment.

## The Scottish campaign

After Charles I was executed on 30 January 1649 as a traitor and the House of Lords was abolished, the Rump Parliament declared England to be a republic, with the title 'Commonwealth of England'. Oliver Cromwell, as leader of the army, took power as the head of the republican parliament. The Scots, who disagreed with the execution of Charles I, had reacted by proclaiming Charles' son as their king, Charles II, on 6 February 1649. They were fearful of Cromwell's new Commonwealth. Cromwell then decided to invade Scotland,



thus starting a Third Civil War.

Fig 2.4

Oliver Cromwell

Matthew rejoined the regular army in 1650 when he was made colonel of a foot regiment recruited for Scottish service [11]. Cromwell's forces inflicted a substantial defeat on the Scots at the Battle of Dunbar in September 1650. After a renewal of hostilities the following year, Matthew Alured and 800 of his men made an audacious night attack on Alyth, Perthshire, where the Scottish Committee of Estates – the country's former government – was meeting. The Scottish Committee were defended by 3,000 Scottish troops, but Alured and his men seized almost the entire Committee, which effectively deprived the Scots of their central leadership.

By January 1654 Matthew was military governor of Ayr, but a few months later he was sent to Ireland to bring a further 1,000 soldiers across to Scotland to help deal with the Royalist rising led by the Earl of Glencairn. Before these forces arrived at Lochaber, on the west coast, in June 1654 he had been relieved of his command by Cromwell and ordered to return to London, [2].

## Matthew falls out with Cromwell

In 1653 Cromwell tightened his control on power. Two Parliaments were dissolved and he took the title of Lord Protector, in December 1653, effectively establishing direct rule. Alured, who was a strong republican and supporter of Parliament, became increasingly disillusioned with Cromwell and the policies he pursued. Cromwell also took steps to suppress opposing groups such as the Leveller movement.

Whilst Cromwell's popularity with much of the army gave him the power and support to carry this through, Matthew Alured, like a number of army officers and soldiers, having fought against one autocratic King, was dismayed. He regarded Cromwell's move as taking over parliamentary sovereignty, gathering power into the hands of one individual, who to him seemed a figure with increasingly authoritarian, even monarchical traits. His criticisms of the outlay on expensive clothing for the Cromwell family were reported to London and he was thereafter regarded as having 'evil intentions' towards Cromwell's regime, hence his removal from command.

Whilst Alured had clearly fallen from Cromwell's favour by the summer of 1654, he was soon perceived as being at the centre of those in disagreement with the Protectorate regime. In October of that

year he was one of three colonels of the New Model Army who put their names to a petition denouncing the regime as contrary to parliamentary government. It was drawn up by the former Leveller, John Wildman, and signed by John Okey and Thomas Saunders, as well as Alured.

## The Three Colonels' Petition

Known to history as *The Petition of the Three Colonels* or *The Humble Petition of Several Colonels of the Army* and addressed to Cromwell, the petition demanded successive parliaments freely chosen by the people [12; p.21]. It deplored the Lord Protector's complete control over a standing army, or as the petition puts it:

*Power to be over such a Militia, as the late King durst not claim; that is to say, A standing Army, which may in a short tract of time...be made wholly Mercenary, and be made use of to destroy at his pleasure the being of Parliaments, and render... us and our Posterities under an absolute Tyranny... [1; p.11].*

Matthew and his fellow petitioners prayed:

*That a full and truly free Parliament may without any imposition on their Judgements and Consciences, freely consider of those Fundamental Rights and Freedoms of the Commonwealth, that were the first Subject of this great contest, which God has decided on our side...and secure our dearly bought Freedome of our consciences, persons and estates, against all future attempts of Tyranny; and such a settlement*

*will stand upon a Basis undoubtedly just by the Laws of God and man; and therefore more likely to continue to us and our posterities [future generations] [1; p.14].*

It is believed that the petition had circulated around several parts of the army and that those involved expected others to sign it, given rising hostility to the Protectorate. However, Cromwell's agents, having wind of the document, searched Alured's chambers and discovered the Petition. Alured was imprisoned and the petition seized, but this was later published, most likely by Wildman [1; p.21].

The Petition of the Three Colonels, which emphasised the sovereignty of Parliament, was a challenge to the very foundations of the Protectorate and, as such, placed the colonels in real danger from Cromwell's regime. In the event, Alured, considered the most meddling, was dismissed from military service for mutiny. He was imprisoned by order of Cromwell, initially for more than twelve months and then, after being allowed home for a period, was returned to prison for a further six months, this time not allowed any communication with family and friends [1; p.2]. Okey was acquitted of treason and allowed his liberty after he surrendered his commission. Saunders seems never to have been imprisoned, but was also required to surrender his commission [12; p.33].

## **In and out of Parliament**

Oliver Cromwell died in September 1658, aged fifty-nine, and was succeeded as Lord Protector by his son Richard, who enjoyed no real power base amongst either the army or politicians [12; p.41]. He called a new Parliament, which assembled in January 1659.

Amongst those returned for the first time

was Matthew Alured, as MP for Hedon. He lost little time in joining with other republican MPs to attack the Protectorate as well as declaring strongly against the presence of royalists in Parliament. He supported the army's subsequent overthrow of Richard Cromwell's Protectorate and became identified as a defender of the sovereignty of parliament.

Matthew was appointed Captain of the Parliamentary Lifeguard and Colonel of Horse by the Rump Parliament [11]. Along with Colonels Okey and Saunders, he called for new elections and was a prominent supporter of the view that all standing armies and their commanders should be obedient to Parliament.

In a period of extreme political instability, even by seventeenth-century standards, Alured, and others like him, were in a difficult position. He opposed the Protectorate but also the prospect of a return to a monarchy, and spoke passionately in support of the ideal of a republican parliament which had control over the army. His was a difficult course to steer in the tumultuous politics which followed the end of the Protectorate.

Further north, General Monck, for whom Alured had once fought in the Scottish campaigns, began to move his substantial forces south, intent on restoring order. Won over by Monck's assurances that he would preserve the republic, Matthew returned to Yorkshire in March 1660 to persuade his fellow republican and East Yorkshire friend, Major General Robert Overton, to give up the governorship of Hull. Matthew then stood as candidate for Hull in the subsequent parliamentary election but, together with Francis Thorpe, the other republican candidate, he finished bottom of the poll that saw his kinsman Andrew

Marvell elected.

## The monarchy restored

During April, Monck also relieved Matthew of his command after some of his troops had declared their opposition to those wishing to restore the monarchy. Later that year Monck helped to organise the return of Charles II and the restoration of the monarchy. After the Restoration, Matthew Alured received a Royal Pardon, but lost many of the lands he had acquired during the 1640s and 1650s.

During the Restoration years Matthew was very much a political outsider and was briefly imprisoned twice in the early 1660s, on suspicion of being involved in plots against the throne. In 1673 he was debarred from taking the office of Mayor of Hedon for refusing to take the required oaths [11]. He spent much of his time in the East Riding, managing his remaining estates, which were scattered across the area, later residing in a house on the east side of Wednesday Market, Beverley.

## Towards a constitutional monarchy

The process of settling many of the conflicts that led to the Civil Wars—the respective roles of monarch and parliament—did not really get underway until after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, when the then King, James II, was overthrown by his nephew William of Orange ('King Billy'), whose wife Mary was James's daughter. This was organised by Parliament, which was suspicious of James' Roman Catholic faith and his closeness to France. Matthew Alured certainly appears to have supported the overthrow of James II and the principles



of the Glorious Revolution settlement, with its guarantees for Parliament.

Fig 2.5

'King Billy' statue, Lowgate, Hull  
(courtesy of Phil Haskins)

This revolution found strong support in Hull. The statue of King William III on his golden horse, in the old Market Place, bears testimony to attitudes of many of Hull's townsfolk to the Glorious Revolution, which was celebrated for many years afterwards by a local public holiday known as Town Taking Day. This marked the day in 1688 that Hull opponents of James II rose up and imprisoned his town officials.

The political settlement brought about in 1688-89 did not lead to the resolution of all religious differences or to the creation of a democracy of all voters, but it did lay the foundations of a constitutional monarchy, one where monarch and parliament governed in partnership. It was from this seventeenth-century turmoil, in which two members of a Hull family fought bravely and persistently for their ideals, that our modern democratic system eventually developed.

## Final years

Matthew seems to have resumed some degree of public life, perhaps even office. He obtained a post with the Hull Customs [9; p.196], previously held by earlier generations of his family. By then in his early seventies, he was one of the East Riding Commissioners appointed by Parliament

to collect the taxes raised to cover King William III's costs for fighting first James II in Ireland and then the general war against France.

Matthew died in August 1694 and in his will he left the proceeds of his relatively modest estate, which included lands in Holme and Sculcoates, to his relatives and to the poor of the parish of St Mary, as well as to the non-conformist minister and the poor of the Presbyterian chapel in Lairgate, Beverley. He was buried, at his wishes, with a simple ceremony, in St

of the hospital, which were alongside the Alured residence in Sculcoates, were rebuilt after the Civil War, but the elegant structures you will find on the site today date from the eighteenth century. The tiny churchyard where Matthew was baptised still remains, but no trace of his grave in St Mary's Churchyard, Beverley, can be identified. Colonel Matthew Alured's main legacy to us is not physical, in the sense of buildings or land. It lies in the story of his remarkable life and his enduring support for



Mary's Churchyard, Beverley [13].

Fig 2.6

Silver bowl (once gilded) with Matthew's coat of arms, gifted by him to Hedon Corporation in 1658  
Reproduced by courtesy of Hedon Town Council.

Today there is little physical evidence of Matthew Alured's life that can be easily seen. Two wine bowls, donated respectively by John and Matthew Alured, still form part of the Hedon Town Council Silver collection. The Charterhouse buildings

the principle of parliamentary sovereignty, held dear to this day.

## Glossary

**Gray's Inn:** one of four professional associations for barristers and judges in London.

**New Model Army:** an army formed in 1645 by the Parliamentarians, intended to serve anywhere rather than being tied to a specific garrison, and comprising professional, paid soldiers - it was disbanded after the Restoration in 1660.

**Parliamentary sovereignty:** the concept that Parliament is not subject to the wishes of the monarch, but is supreme over all constitutional bodies.

**Privy Council:** a formal body of advisers to the monarch.

**Reformation:** (in England) Henry VIII's break with the Roman Catholic Church and the establishment of the Church of England.

**Regicides:** those complicit in the execution of the King - here signatories to Charles I's death warrant.

**republican:** one who wishes to abolish the monarchy, preferring an elected President.

**Standing army:** a permanent, paid army, not disbanded in peacetime.

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# Mary Wollstonecraft: The Rights and Wrongs of Women

Kathleen Lennon

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## Feminist

Hull is well known as the home of William Wilberforce (1759-1833), who led the long and ultimately successful parliamentary campaign for the abolition of the slave trade. But East Yorkshire, this time Beverley, was also home, for many years, to the feminist philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797). Wollstonecraft, born in the same year as Wilberforce, campaigned against what she saw as another sort of slavery: the position of women. She claimed:

*If women are excluded, without having a voice, from participation in the natural rights of mankind... man must...act like a tyrant.*

*You force all women, by denying them civil and political rights, to remain in their families, groping in the dark...They may be convenient slaves but slavery will have its constant effects, degrading the master and the abject dependent.*

## Early Life in Beverley

Mary Wollstonecraft spent her formative years in East Yorkshire (from the ages of nine to fifteen), longer than anywhere else in her life. It is said to be the only place she remembered with any affection. Initially, the family farmed at Walkington, outside Beverley, but three years later took a house in the town centre. She went to a day school that taught little more than reading and writing, which, together with

basic arithmetic, music and dancing, was thought to be enough for the education of gentlewomen of her time. However, she received useful schooling from Dr John Arden, philosopher father of her friend Jane Arden. He was a Fellow of the Royal Society, specialising in astronomy, and gave public lectures on science and literary subjects. Mary and Jane (who was educated at home) had first met at one of his lectures, and became firm friends, sharing a love of poetry and literature. The Arden family was poor, John Arden having been disinherited by his Catholic father for converting to Protestantism. Jane, six months older than Mary, was popular with her peers and wanted to become a governess.

Mary's father hated the idea of female learning. The family's hopes were pinned on their first-born son, her brother Ned, who was to train as a solicitor. Mary's autobiographical novel, *The Wrongs of Woman: Or, Maria*, published after her death, shows her bitterness towards Ned, in a fictional portrayal: 'a being privileged by nature—a boy, and the darling of my mother, he did not fail to act like an heir apparent.' Fortunately, lessons from John Arden, who realised how clever Mary was, provided help for her, making up for her family's neglect during her adolescence.

A plaque on the house she lived in can be found on a house in Wednesday Market. For the rest of her life, in her letters, she referred fondly to walks on Beverley Westwood.



Fig 3.1  
Mary Wollstonecraft

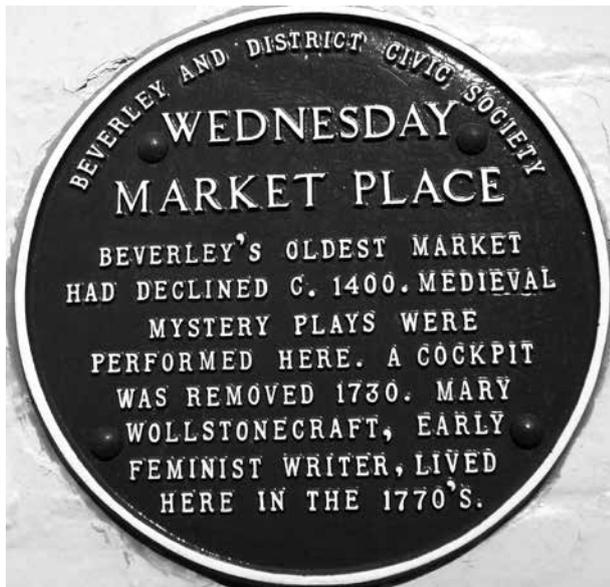


Fig 3.2  
Plaque in Wednesday Market, Beverley

## The position of women in society

Wollstonecraft's most famous book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, was published in 1792. It has recently been re-published by Penguin, in the *Great Ideas* series, a series dedicated to republishing 'works of the great thinkers, pioneers, radicals and visionaries whose ideas shook civilisation and helped make us who we are'. She is one of those.

At the time Wollstonecraft was writing, women were considered the property of their husbands and fathers (a position which led to the practice, still common today, in which a father walks his daughter down the aisle and gives her over to her

husband in marriage, where she changes her surname from that of her father to that of her husband). In most cases they were unable to own property in their own right. Even in the social classes in which some education was offered to men, women gained no systematic education. They could play no part in political processes, either by voting or standing for office. To support themselves when they grew up, middle-class women needed to gain a husband. Jane Austen's classic novel *Pride and Prejudice*, first published in 1813, illustrates the difficulties women faced at that time. For without a husband, Wollstonecraft declares:

*Girls who have been thus weakly educated, are often cruelly left by their parents without any provision; and, of course, are dependent on...the bounty [support] of their brothers. These brothers are, to view the fairest side of the question, good sort of men, and give as a favour, what children of the same parents had an equal right to. In this...humiliating situation, a docile female may remain some time, with a tolerable degree of comfort. But, when the brother marries, a probable circumstance, from being considered as the mistress of the family, she is viewed with averted looks as an intruder, an unnecessary burden on the benevolence of the master of the house, and his new partner.*

*Who can recount the misery, which many unfortunate beings, whose minds and bodies are equally weak, suffer in such situations—unable to work, and ashamed to beg.*

## How to attract and keep a husband

Concentrating on the position of such middle-class and upper-class women, Wollstonecraft paints a dismal picture of women who are brought up to be pleasing to men in order to gain a husband. They are preoccupied by their appearance and attractiveness; taught to make themselves docile and submissive, *'her mind left to rust'*. To aid her attractiveness the woman is taught to stress her physical and mental weakness, her need for a man to defend her:

*Fragile in every sense of the word, they are obliged to look up to man for every comfort. In the most trifling danger they cling to their support... piteously demanding...[comfort]... and their natural protector extends his arm, or lifts up his voice, to guard the lovely trembler—from what? Perhaps the frown of an old cow, or the jump of a mouse.*

Once a husband is gained she watches in alarm if her physical charms fade, for there is no other basis for her companionship. She is powerless when her husband takes mistresses or turns to prostitutes. There is a double standard of morality at work here. A woman's most important moral characteristic is seen to be chastity. She is an outcast from society if she takes lovers before or after marriage. But men are exempt from such judgments.

*With respect to reputation, the attention is confined to a single virtue—chastity. If the honour of a woman, as it is absurdly called, is safe, she may neglect every social duty; nay, ruin her family by gaming and extravagance; yet still present a shameless front—for truly she is an honourable woman!*

*But, in proportion as this regard for the reputation of chastity is prized by women, it is despised by men: and the two extremes are equally destructive.*

## Why women were vulnerable

Yet women brought up to think only of sentimentality, love and romance, are particularly vulnerable to the attentions of seducers who, themselves unharmed by the relationship, leave the women as outcasts of society, often with children to raise outside of marriage. (Many novels throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century are about this theme.)

*Asylums and Magdalens are not the proper remedies for these abuses. It is justice, not charity, that is wanting in the world!*

## How working-class women were different

Working-class women were in a very different position at the time that Wollstonecraft was writing. They, like working-class men, had no access to education, but they worked in the factories, in the field, in domestic service. So although their living conditions were often very poor and they had many pregnancies to bear, they were spared the need to win men by vanities and the silliness and frivolity which she saw as following from this.

*Many poor women maintain their children by the sweat of their brow, and keep together families that the vices of the fathers would have scattered abroad; but gentlewomen are too indolent to be actively*

*virtuous...Indeed, [there is much]... good sense which I have met with, among the poor women who have had few advantages of education, and yet have acted heroically.*

## Revolutionary Times in America and France

Wollstonecraft was living in extraordinary times. The American Revolution (1775-1783), ending British rule in America, began when she was sixteen and ended when she was twenty-four. There were slave revolts in the Caribbean and America, while in Britain the movement for the abolition of slavery gathered pace. Most crucially, when she was thirty, the French Revolution broke out. On 14 July 1789 the Bastille, in Paris, was stormed. Six weeks later the French Assembly accepted the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*, proclaiming *liberty, equality, fraternity*, and the right to



resist oppression.

Fig 3.3

'The Storming of the Bastille on 14 July 1789'  
(Charles Thévenin ca 1793)

These events prompted fierce debates in English society. The writer and thinker Edmund Burke wrote *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, published in 1790. It was a direct attack on the arguments for change voiced, among many, by Wollstonecraft's friend Richard Price. Burke insisted that monarchy, property and established religion must continue to form the traditional institutions of the state.

Mary Wollstonecraft's book *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (first published anonymously and then under her name) accused Burke of being hostile to reason and ridiculed his demand for respect for tradition: 'We are to reverence the rust of antiquity'. Her insistence on rationality ('*The exercise of our faculties is the great end*'), her commitment to human rights, her contempt for the values of those in power, are all expressed with vigour throughout the book.

Her next book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* followed in January 1792. This was her reaction to the proposal by a French revolutionary to establish a national education system for all boys. Even for revolutionaries of the time, 'rights of men' were confined to the male sex. In her book, Mary demanded '*JUSTICE for one-half of the human race*'. This was a scathing criticism of the society she observed, together with a passionate argument for fundamental change. Its publication was a sensation: it was widely read, translated into French and German and well reviewed; but within the year it fell prey to mounting panic in England about the impact of the increasingly violent revolution in France. Thomas Paine was indicted for his *Rights of Man* and, while her work was admired in radical groups, Mary's analysis of the position of women was attacked as 'indecent' by conservative writers who wanted no change.

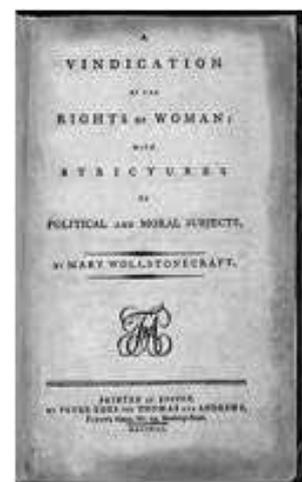


Fig 3.4

Cover page of  
'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman'

Wollstonecraft urged French reformers, in their stress on liberty and equality, to remember the position of women. She did not support violence but was sympathetic to the overthrow of the monarchy. British writers, poets like the young Wordsworth, and intellectuals like Tom Paine went to France to experience the upheavals at first hand. Mary Wollstonecraft joined them in December 1792. Despite her opposition to the monarchy she was very shaken when she saw the king (Louis XVI) being driven through the street lined with guards, and later condemned to death. She stayed in France for two years, during times of acute violence (the 'Reign of Terror') and often in personal danger, in the years following the revolution.

## Reason and Enlightenment

In 1784 the philosopher Immanuel Kant had written:

*Dare to know! (Sapere aude.)  
"Have the courage to use your own  
understanding," is therefore the  
motto of the enlightenment.*

He, along with many other thinkers of the time, stressed the importance to human beings of the capacity to reason. They thought the capacity to think for ourselves was what distinguished human beings from animals. 'Dare to think for yourself', Kant argued. In stressing this capacity to reason, however, these thinkers privileged some human beings over others, namely educated white men! Women and African peoples, amongst others (for some writers working-class people in general), were not seen as having the same ability to reason, and were regarded like children, needing guidance.

Wollstonecraft believed in the importance of reason, in the importance of being taught to think for oneself. She insisted women too had this capacity, but due to

their upbringing and social position they were not taught to develop and use it. In this way they became prey to foolish emotions and vanities. To develop this capacity for reason they must be educated in the same way that men were. (Here she is thinking of middle- and upper-class men, as at this time working-class men had little education). So in her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* she argued that both men and women were rational beings and should be treated as such. The French philosopher Rousseau had argued that educated women would lose their power over men. To this she replied, 'I do not wish them to have power over men, but over themselves'.

## Education and new rights

She thought that many advantages would come from the education of women and by their being granted civil and political rights. They would be able to support themselves if this became necessary. They would be able to bring up their children in a much more enlightened way. They would be able to have friendship and companionship with their husbands, instead of the false relations of romantic love. They would also be enabled to be just and honourable in their judgments about public issues.

*Would men but generously snap  
our chains, and be content with  
rational fellowship instead of slavish  
obedience, they would find us  
more observant daughters, more  
affectionate sisters, more faithful  
wives, more reasonable mothers—  
in a word, better citizens.*

But men would also need to change. They would need to cease being tyrannical in their relations with women. They must be prepared to have respect and consideration for them; to honour those

with whom they had sexual relationships and take responsibility for their children. They must be prepared to enter into the activities of the household, '*spend time in their nursery*', give up their mistresses and treat their wives as friends and partners.

## The importance of genuine emotions

But unlike many of the Enlightenment philosophers, Wollstonecraft did not downplay the importance of emotions. She thought genuine emotions, deep feeling and a good heart to be important alongside reason. They should work together. What she criticised was the way women were brought up to be a prey to superficial and trivial feelings. With education and a training of reason, emotion would also deepen and be properly directed. She believed that '*understanding enlarges the heart*' and that '*we should then love...with true affection, because we should learn to respect ourselves.*'

She says, '*It is not against strong, persevering passions; but romantic wavering feelings that I wish to guard the female heart by exercising the understanding.*'

## Mary's Personal Life

Mary Wollstonecraft was the second of seven children, four boys and three girls. She was closest to her youngest sister, Evarina. Their father, who had inherited a thriving silk-weaving business from his father, sold it in 1764 and sought success as a gentleman farmer throughout much of her childhood. He was not a good businessman and the family moved around a good deal as one business after another failed. More seriously, he was a gambler and drinker and could be violent at home. In *Maria*, Mary later told of sleeping on the landing and shielding her mother from his blows.

Her father's financial ruin was complete when she turned nineteen; to help the family finances Mary left home to work as a paid companion. After returning to nurse her dying mother, she left home again to start a school. This got into financial difficulties, so she was forced to take a job as a governess, but she was soon encouraged by a friend to begin writing. Within two months she had produced her first book, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, which the publisher Joseph Johnson instantly accepted. Written in the first person and based on her own experience, this book contains themes that appeared in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* six years later. At a time when educational texts took the primary reason for a girl's existence to be to obtain men's approval by softness, innocence (faked if need be) and unthinking submissiveness, it was revolutionary.

## Personal relationships

From 1788, working closely with Johnson on his influential new journal *The Analytical Review*, she mixed regularly with radical thinkers, writers and political activists in London, and met her first serious love, the married Swiss-born artist and writer, Henry Fuseli. This relationship ended badly and, disappointed, she left for Paris, where, in April 1793, she began an affair with Gilbert Imlay (1754-1828). He was an American army captain, also a writer, and a businessman involved in land speculation. He had become a diplomat in France at this time. Although they did not marry formally, she regarded herself as his wife, took his surname, and believed this to be the serious, passionate and mutually respectful relationship of which she had written.

She became pregnant and had a daughter, Fanny, while in France. However, Imlay's initial commitment to her proved to be only temporary and he left her. She followed him, first to Le Havre and then to London. With

Fanny and her nursemaid she undertook exhausting travels in Scandinavia on his behalf in 1795, which she described in *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*. This book was published by Johnson in January 1796 and was widely read and translated. But by October 1795 she was forced to accept that her relationship with Imlay was at an end. In her words, '*I leaned on a spear, that has pierced me to the heart*'. In her despair, she tried to kill herself by jumping off Putney Bridge into the Thames. She was saved by local boatmen.

## **An unmarried mother in London**

Her life in London as an unmarried mother was difficult. Many of her previous friends and contacts rejected her. Although a controversial figure in London, she remained actively involved in radical discussion circles, where she gradually developed a relationship with the prominent author William Godwin. A very quiet, orderly bachelor, he was emotionally her opposite, but shared many of her political views, including her views about equality in the relations between men and women. They married on 29 March 1797. Godwin also took on responsibility for Fanny, whom he loved dearly. Sadly, following the birth of her second daughter, Mary died on 10 September. None of her own family attended her funeral.

Fanny, brought up by Godwin, was mild and affectionate but prone to depression, and committed suicide at twenty-two. Mary's second daughter, named after her, became Mary Shelley, wife of the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, and was the author of the novel *Frankenstein*.

## Glossary

**American revolution:** From 1765, American colonists refused to pay taxes to the British Parliament, since they were not represented there. Their protests led to the Boston Tea Party of 1773; the next year supporters of the Crown and royal officials were expelled, and the War of Independence (1775-83) led to the secession of the American colonies from Britain.

**Bastille:** The Bastille was a fortress in Paris used as a state prison by the kings of France.

**French Assembly:** the French Parliament at the time of the Revolution of July 1789.

**William Godwin:** (3 March 1756 - 7 April 1836) combined journalism, political philosophy and creative writing. He is best known for two books published in quick succession: *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* is an attack on political institutions, and *Things as They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams*, the first mystery novel, is an attack on aristocratic privilege. A year after Mary's death he published a candid biography, *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which scandalised the conservative press.

**Madgalens:** Magdalens were religious hostels run for so-called 'fallen women', usually, unmarried mothers.

**Thomas (Tom) Paine:** was born in England but emigrated to America at the time of the American Revolution, where he was a political activist, wrote influential pamphlets, and became an advocate of the French Revolution. He is now best known for his defence of the Revolution in 'The Rights of Man'.

**Reign of Terror:** The Reign of Terror (5 September 1793 – 28 July 1794) was a period of violence in France that occurred after the onset of the French Revolution, caused by conflict between rival political factions and marked by mass executions of "enemies of the revolution". Tens of thousands of people died.

**Jean-Jacques Rousseau:** (1712-1778) was a highly influential French philosopher.

## NOTES

A picture of the plaque in Wednesday market Beverley can be found here: <http://www.hulldailymail.co.uk/Professor-visits-home-pioneering-feminist/story-18879675-detail/story.html>.

The quotes from Mary Wollstonecraft are from *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*; available free online at <http://www.bartleby.com/144/103.html>

The Penguin version is: Mary Wollstonecraft, 2004, *Penguin Great Ideas: A Vindication of the Rights Of Woman*.

The quote from Kant is from his paper *What is Enlightenment*. This is also available free at <http://www.columbia.edu/acis/ets/CCREAD/etscc/kant.html>.

A good, but not always flattering modern biography: Claire Tomalin, 2012 *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Penguin)

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# Thomas Perronet Thompson: Governor, Abolitionist, Radical

Cecile Oxaal and Ekkehard Kopp

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## The Thompson family

Thomas Perronet Thompson, the eldest son of Thomas and Philothea Thompson, was born in Hull on 15 March 1783. Thomas senior, a farmer's son from Swine, near Hull, was a clerk in the merchant firm of Wilberforce and Smith, founded by the grandfather of William Wilberforce. After the founder's death in 1788, Thompson became a partner in the firm—now re-named as Smiths and Thompson—and the family lived on its premises at what is now known as Wilberforce House in the old High Street. He worked with William Wilberforce in the campaign to abolish the slave trade and in 1807 became the first Methodist lay preacher to serve as a Member of Parliament. He campaigned for the abolition of the tithe system for tenant farmers, chaired the Hull Guardians of the Poor, set up soup kitchens and used his influence and wealth to provide pauper families with land on which to settle and cultivate crops.

Philothea Thompson's grandfather Vincent Perronet was an associate of John and Charles Wesley, the founders of Methodism. In the fashion of the day, the couple's eldest son was given his mother's family name and, to avoid confusion, we refer to him as Perronet throughout this account of his life. Despite his strict Methodist upbringing, as a young man Perronet did not follow established Christian beliefs, but later in his life he showed respect for the Church of England.



Fig 4.1  
'Cottingham Castle', Thomas's Thompson's residence, finished in 1816, which Perronet inherited in 1828. Let to tenants, it burnt down in 1869. The remains of the tower are in the grounds of Castle Hill Hospital.

## Education and Military Service

Perronet attended Hull Grammar School and then became a student at Queens' College, Cambridge. In 1802 he graduated with first class honours in mathematics. His lifelong fascination with mathematics was evident in pamphlets he wrote on political economy, especially about the connection between economic policies and social justice (fairness in society).

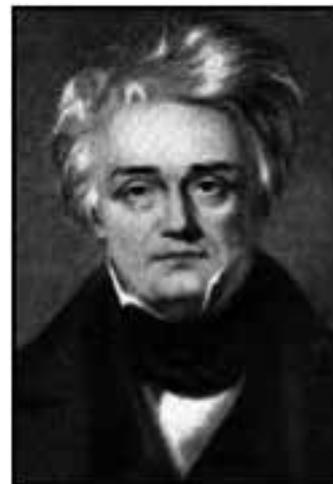


Fig 4.2  
Thomas Perronet Thompson



Fig 4.3  
Hull Grammar School

In 1804 Perronet was offered a fellowship at Queens' College. However, he joined the Royal Navy as a midshipman and transferred to the army as Second Lieutenant in 1806. The Napoleonic Wars (1799-1815) with France resulted in land and sea battles ranging across Europe, North Africa and further afield. During a long military career Perronet gained repeated promotion, retiring from active service as Lieutenant-Colonel in 1829, and eventually attaining the rank of General. Under the Duke of Wellington's command he was awarded the Peninsular Medal for action in Portugal and Spain in 1813-14.

In 1807, during a failed expedition against the Spanish at Buenos Aires, Argentina, Perronet was captured by the Spanish forces and released shortly afterwards. On his return to England he visited William Wilberforce, who had led the long campaign by the influential group of religious social reformers known as 'The Clapham Sect' (or 'The Saints') to outlaw the slave trade in Britain and its colonies. In the same year, the British parliament passed the Act of the Abolition of the Slave Trade. Wilberforce discussed Africa and the slave trade with his guest Perronet, who was *'...so excited by the conversation that he sat up all night "combining arrangements ashore and afloat for opening or improving the communications with the interior of Africa"'* [2; p.26].

## The Province of Freedom



Fig 4.4  
Modern map of Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone, on the coast of West Africa, had seen settlements of freed slaves since the late eighteenth century. In 1786 the abolitionist Granville Sharp, helped by charitable donations and the British government, organised the transportation to Sierra Leone of over 400 of the 'Black Poor' of London to land bought from a native chief. Sharp gave it an impressive name, Province of Freedom. The settlers were former slaves who had come to England from the colonies and included some from America who had fought for the British during the American War of Independence and were given their freedom. Others were unemployed seamen, acting as servants while waiting for their next voyage. There were also some Europeans: craftsmen, women, a few teachers and doctors, and a church official.

Sharp intended that the settlement, Granville Town, would be a model self-ruling one. Sadly, it failed: many died from diseases; agricultural projects were unsuccessful; and the hostility of the native Africans, partly stirred up by slave traders operating all around the settlement and inside it—raiding it for slaves and inducing some of the settlers to become slavers—resulted in the torching of the town two years later by the native Africans, in revenge for the burning of their town in a dispute during the previous month.

## The Sierra Leone Company

When Sharp heard that the settlement had been destroyed he asked the British government for help to restore it, but this was refused. Instead, he persuaded charitable investors to form the Sierra Leone Company, which was authorised by Parliament in 1791. The Clapham Sect, inspired by Sharp's vision, saw that Sierra Leone could become

*an ideal society where races could mix on terms of equality, where free Africans would prosper by cultivation and legitimate trade, and the myths used to justify the slave trade would be finally demolished.*  
[5: pp. 326-7].

An Act of Parliament authorised the Company to keep the land and any other land it acquired. Clause 5 of the Act stated

*It shall not be lawful for the said Company either directly or indirectly by itself or themselves or by Agents or Servants of the said Company... to deal or traffic in the buying or selling of Slaves.*

The directors of the Company also required all the employees, 'under heavy penalty,' not to trade in slaves [2; p.28].

## Freetown

In 1792 another settlement, named Freetown, was established on the ruins of Granville Town. The British government entrusted the management of Freetown to the elected directors of the Company. They were allowed to make laws for those concerned in the Company's activities, and, therefore, they ruled on behalf of the Secretary of State (a senior Minister of the

government).

Sharp disagreed with these arrangements, finding it '*...repulsive to direct those he had intended should direct themselves*' and wanting a Company that would work mainly for the benefit of the settlers, not to make a profit for the investors [1; p.27]. After this, he lost much of his influence and the settlement was ruled by the Company's directors, far away in England. Henry Thornton, a rich banker and close friend of Wilberforce, was elected to chair the Company by his fellow directors, who thought that business was more important than charitable projects. The survivors of Granville Town (the 'Old Settlers') had rebuilt their settlement at another site and kept the name Granville Town, but when they were attacked again by native Africans they agreed to be under the authority of the Company.



Fig 4.5

Freetown Harbour in the early nineteenth century

## New settlers

During the following fifteen years two large groups of new settlers arrived in Freetown. The first were more former American slaves, mostly from the South, who had fought for the British during the American War of Independence and had been given their freedom and land in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick (now provinces

of Canada). Discontented with their poor farmland, discrimination and exploitation by employers, and finding the harsh winters unbearable, 1100 of them had come to Sierra Leone in the early 1790s, becoming known as 'Nova Scotians'. The British government paid the shipping costs and the Sierra Leone Company arranged the journeys.

The second group comprised Maroons, escaped slaves from Jamaica. They had been defeated in a rebellion against British colonial rule and deported to Nova Scotia in 1795. Unaccustomed, like the ex-American slaves, to the harsh winters there, they asked to be sent to Africa. In 1800 the Sierra Leone Company arranged to resettle 550 of them, with the costs of their transport borne by the British government. Upon arrival they were called upon to help put down a rebellion among the Nova Scotians, resulting in lasting distrust between these two groups. All of these black settlers formed a very different kind of community: partly European, partly African.

## Another failure

While not expecting large profits, the Company spent generously in the hope that the settlement would be successful. However it did not manage the settlement effectively. Problems arose from incompetence, bad planning, poor organisation and dissatisfaction among employees because of low salaries, high prices and overwork. Those allowed to trade privately were buying and selling slaves, and crop failures on the infertile soil caused food shortages. Disputes with native inhabitants sprang up about the meaning of land ownership and about payments or gifts in exchange for land. There was distrust among the settler communities, and disagreements with the Company over grants of land. Adding to the difficulties were attacks on the town by the French. All these factors contributed to

the Nova Scotians' rebellion in 1800.

Although the Company received increasing grants of money from the British government, the financial problems of running the settlement led Thornton to ask the British government to take over its administration. Parliament authorised this in August 1807 and the transfer to British responsibility took place in Freetown on 1 January 1808, establishing the new Crown colony of Sierra Leone and ending the rule of the Sierra Leone Company. Despite the transfer, the Clapham Sect kept its influence over the affairs of the colony. Thornton thought that the British government, which did not know much about the colony, would rely on the Company's knowledge.

## The first Crown-appointed governor

When Perronet had visited Wilberforce they had discussed the need for a suitable person to run the new Crown colony. Wilberforce was so impressed by Perronet's courage, commitment and enthusiasm that he offered the young man the post. Perronet accepted; in the *Narrative of Facts* he wrote in 1811 about his Sierra Leone experiences, he gave his reasons:

*Educated in the principles of hostility to the Slave Trade which the observations of every day have tended only to confirm, I had frequently viewed the transactions of the Colony of Sierra Leone with considerable interest, heightened by personal and hereditary respect for many of its principal supporters.*  
[3; UDT 1/102]

Perronet would need all of the qualities Wilberforce saw in him in order to succeed

in Sierra Leone. It was agreed that the annual salary of £1,500 would be increased to £2,000 when he took up the post. (With inflation this equates to well over £100,000 in current terms.) The probable reason for the high salary was that the place was considered quite dangerous at the time, mainly because of the high death rate from tropical diseases.

He landed in Freetown on 21 July 1808, after a two-month journey by sea. His instructions were to wait until the official communication arrived from the British government, in a few months' time, with orders for him to begin his governorship. Meanwhile, outgoing Governor Ludlam was to inform him about the affairs of the colony. Much to his surprise, a few days after his arrival, he found that Ludlam wanted him to take office immediately, stating that he needed time to settle the accounts of the Sierra Leone Company. In his *Narrative of Facts*, Perronet explained that he had little choice but to agree: the colony could not remain without a Governor, and Ludlam had authority to enact the transfer of power. Perronet was formally declared Governor on 26 July 1808.

Perronet went to Sierra Leone with strong principles and determination. The founders hoped progress in the colony would show that black people were capable of ruling their countries and not, as widely believed, fit only for slavery. A further practical argument against the slave trade in Africa was that it led to more wars among tribes, causing less agricultural production and limiting opportunities for profitable trade with Africa through the exchange of British manufactured goods for tropical products. While Perronet's direct responsibility was to the British government, he could not ignore the colony's humanitarian founders and other important public persons and institutions, who were interested in information about Africa and its development.

Nevertheless, Perronet had serious doubts. Before he left England, a former governor had mentioned to him a plan for 'redeeming' natives (Perronet's underlining) and employing them in farming. Perronet suspected that the term meant a form of slavery, writing '*If I had heard an angel speak blasphemy, I should scarcely have been more astonished.*' [3; UDTH 1/102]. During his voyage he was told by another former governor that slavery had always existed and was necessary in the colony. Perronet concluded that '*all might not be quite right in this boasted Colony, & that it was possible for one face of things to be exhibited in England & a very different one in Africa.*' He decided to form his own judgement at first hand.

## First impressions of Freetown

When Peronnet arrived in Freetown there was a population of about 2,000 people, comprising the various groups described earlier (including some inhabitants of mixed race); slaves whom the Royal Navy, patrolling the Atlantic Ocean, had 'recaptured' from slaving ships operating after the abolition of the slave trade in March 1807 and taken to Freetown, as the law specified; employees of the Sierra Leone Company and their families; and slave traders and banished rebels who had taken advantage of a three-month amnesty after abolition to settle in the colony.

Most of the population was black, but there were many cultural differences (customs and ways of living) which they brought with them from their former countries. Peronnet also noticed the attitude of the ruling officials towards each group—'divide and rule' was a common strategy of colonial rulers. One example of this was an incident on the day of Perronet's arrival.

As he stood with an official before the governor's house at the top of a hill, some Nova Scotians were formally introduced to him. Meanwhile, two Maroon chiefs

waiting to pay their respects, were sent away without his knowledge and told to return the next day. Perronet related:

*The two chiefs of a high-spirited people to whom the Colony had several times been indebted for its preservation, one in his 83rd & the other in his 69th year had climbed a hill at noon in Africa to pay their respects to a young man of 25, while their tribe was waiting below to draw auguries from their reception - and this young man had been spirited away that the veterans might be sent back with dishonour to their people....*

*The truth was there was a favourite race whom it was wished to introduce to me; for several of the Nova Scotia negroes were formally introduced to me...very respectable men, some of them, as I had afterwards occasion to know - but there was no occasion to insult the chiefs of a war-like tribe to whose fidelity the Colony owed its existence.*

Somehow, Perronet quickly heard about this and ran after the two chiefs. "You are very young, Governor," one of them remarked. "I see white heads to counsel me," [3; UDTH 1/102] Perronet replied.

He soon found further evidence of cultural differences among the inhabitants, writing to Anne Elizabeth (Nancy) Barker, his future wife, that

*There is much that is very doleful and some that is good. The state of European manners is bad beyond*

*description. The black subjects are infinitely more orderly and decent. So much for this religious colony. And while the white inhabitants are roaring with strong drink at one end the Nova Scotians are roaring out hymns at the other [2; p.40].*

In his *Narrative of Facts*, he wrote that he worried about the consequences of frequent drunkenness among officials, and the impression it would create among the observant and teetotal Moslems who surrounded the colony.

## **The apprenticeship system**

An even more serious problem was that slavery was legal in Sierra Leone until the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and some settlers, including black settlers, were involved in trading in slaves. Despite the Company's law prohibiting dealing in slaves, some employees and former employees did so. After the abolition of the slave trade, some continued to trade in slaves.

There was also a new kind of slave trading by employees of the Company when dealing with slaves recaptured by the Royal Navy. The recaptured slaves were referred to as Liberated Africans or Recaptives. The Abolition Act of 1807 stated that

*...in no case should Liberated Africans be liable to be sold, disposed of, treated or dealt with as Slaves... His Majesty's officers [were] to enter and enlist the same, or any of them, into His Majesty's land or Sea Service, as Soldiers, Seamen, or marines, or bind the same, or any of them, whether of full Age or not as Apprentices, for any term not exceeding Fourteen Years.*



Fig 4.6

Liberated Africans ("Recaptives") arriving in Sierra Leone - an 1835 drawing.

However, Peronnet discovered on the day he landed in the colony that the apprenticeship system was being abused, confirming his earlier suspicions, as he wrote to Nancy a few days later. A slave trader had suggested that if Peronnet would allow him to bring slaves into the colony and apprentice them for fourteen years, when seven years had passed he would apprentice them again and by then *'they will have pretty well worked themselves out'* [2; p.41]. It was clear, Peronnet wrote, that new terms such as 'redemption' and 'ransoming', which some employers used for the apprenticeship system, meant *'nothing but old slavery writ large'* [2; p.42]. He did not understand why the directors of the Company did not realise what was happening.

Then there were the consequences of an occurrence in March 1808, about five months before he assumed office, when two ships carrying slaves were captured. Some Recaptives were kept for public works and others were sold as 'apprentices' for a fourteen-year term. In reality, this was temporary rather than lifelong slavery: they did forced, unpaid labour, under threat of punishment. (The women were *'given away'*.) Failing to understand the slight difference between 'apprenticeship' and slavery, several Recaptives had run away, enticed by native Africans who offered them paid work. Some were brought back by native Africans and jailed. Perronet wrote that the outgoing governor had disputes with the native Africans for the return of those public works apprentices

still missing. [2; p.40]

In a letter to Nancy, he pointed out sarcastically that *'...these apprenticeships have after sixteen years successful struggle at last introduced actual slavery into the colony.'* He was glad to become the governor early

*... because it will give me an opportunity of writing with more effect to Lord Castlereagh [Secretary of State in the British government]. I am writing to [him] and Mr Wilberforce very plainly about the colony, and shall assert roundly that if every step which has been taken in this affair of the apprentices is not retracted instantly the colony will soon be little better than a slave factory [2; pp.40-41]*

He added that the effect of his letters would be that either the corruption would be stopped or he would be sacked or leave, but that he was acting as any honest man would.

## Decisive action

But Peronnet may have remembered his spirited discussions with Wilberforce, the high ideals of the long struggle for abolition and the hope for progress in Africa. Driven also by his hatred of slavery, he decided to immediately enforce the laws prohibiting slave trading. In front of a crowd he freed the jailed apprentices, told them they were free to work for wages and to appeal to him if they were treated badly. He promptly issued an official declaration that the sales and purchases, direct and indirect, of the above-mentioned slave ships be declared null and void and introduced a law making it a crime to traffic in or keep slaves. He insisted that

the government had a duty to ensure that every slave in the settlement had an equal right to claim the fair price of his labour.

When more Recaptives arrived, he searched for official papers that he was told had been received by the previous governor and found, 'among sundry musty papers', documents giving the authority to hold a Vice-Admiralty Court to deal with Recaptives. The Court should 'condemn' the captain of a slave ship, the recaptured slaves were to be forfeited to the Crown (government) and the Royal Navy captors awarded a bounty for each Recaptive.

Perronet made every effort to persuade the black inhabitants not to tolerate slavery and to ensure they knew of their right to freedom. In the *Sierra Leone Gazette*, on 20 August 1808, he stated:

*What African does not see that as long as a slave is permitted to breathe in this Colony neither he nor his children are in safety? What happens to one black man today may happen to another tomorrow... you will act the good and brave men; you will defend the Government which defends you; and you will be happy... [4; pp.23-24]*

He explained to Nancy his efforts to make his intentions understood by all the black inhabitants:

*[They] had a natural jealousy of their personal freedom (for of political freedom, whatever noise was made about it, they certainly had none at all), this might perhaps be worked upon. I sent for their leading men; I went into their houses and in the hearing of their families impressed*

*upon them the peril in which the personal freedom of every man of colour was placed if the Acts of Parliament by which the holding of slaves was forbidden in the Colony were in the slightest way infringed.*

*-- Why were men of colour considered as an inferior race? Because they were black slaves, but not white ones. Could they ever expect to enjoy the equality of rights which had been promised to them to induce them to settle, if gangs of black men were to be seen working under the stick as slaves, as at present; if they were to be allowed to be bought like cattle and transferred like other property? [2; p.43]*

Among the important papers he unearthed, 'which might have lain there for ages before they might have been found', were instructions from the British government; there were no strict orders to apprentice the Recaptives or prevent him from using his own judgement. In this letter to Nancy, he wrote that he would resign if he had to apprentice them. Writing to the directors of the Sierra Leone Company, Perronet made clear the corruption of the apprenticeship system. Unlike the Company, he was not willing to wait for slavery to wither away as a result of the Abolition Act, the introduction of Christianity and education.

At first there were few ways in which Perronet could help the Recaptives. Rees explains that 'there were still no funds from London for their settlement....Some of the children might be enrolled in the just-founded charity school and a few of the more competent adults be given plots of land to farm, but Governor Thompson was embarrassed to find that the only way he could provide for the rest was some

version of the system he had said he would never adopt' [4; p.21].

## Plans for development

However, Perronet soon started schemes for employing Recaptives in clearing land. He paid them low wages instead of bare maintenance as before, which

*proved to be an effective incentive to harder work. The men cut their way into the woods 'with loud songs'...they dispute the prize of vigour for their respective nations, and we advance into the country like a conflagration. Will slaves do this? [2; p.45]*

He stressed the importance of farming, conducted crop experiments—an experimental garden area outside the town was named Kingston-in-Africa in honour of his hometown—offered generous land grants with security of tenure to those who cleared the land, so as to increase food production and road construction. His insistence that waged labour is more economical than forced labour did much to achieve two of his main objectives for the colony: the eradication of slavery and the development of agriculture. Economic progress in the colony led two slave owners on the coast to offer to free 400 slaves, who would become paid labourers in the colony, and Perronet began to hope that investors would help to develop the colony.

A third objective of Perronet's was the defence and security of the colony. Although attached to the military all his life, he sought peaceful solutions to conflict. He faced the threat of an attack by an alliance of native chiefs who were slave traders and thought that, while their slave trading was being checked by the Abolition Act, some

people in the colony still traded in slaves. Perronet sent messages to the chiefs to come and see that justice was being done about the slave trade. In the resulting treaty, the chiefs agreed to defend of any of their number who was attacked in his own country, negotiate in good faith in any disputes and elect a leader to command their joint forces in any conflict. Johnson describes this agreement as similar to the Covenant of the League of Nations.

## Reactions in London

But Perronet's principled actions to put an end to slavery and what he saw as its many disguises in the apprenticeship system were criticised. When Lord Castlereagh received Perronet's letters condemning what he had found in Sierra Leone, he passed the letters on to Wilberforce and Thornton, and sent an abrupt reply to Perronet, ordering him to return to England. The whistleblower was fired. The directors of the Company, '*prominent public figures whose reputation and attachment to good causes had placed them in the unique position of being advisers to government ministers and representatives of the national conscience*' [5; p.339] feared that Perronet's disclosures would damage their reputations and usefulness.

A letter signed by Thornton as chairman and dated October 1808, which Perronet did not receive until February 1809, sought to refute Perronet's claims. The most important issue was the apprentice system. Replying to Perronet's accusation that the slaves recaptured in March 1808 were sold like slaves, the directors wrote that they '*could not agree that the transaction ought to be confounded [confused] with that of a Sale of Slaves.*' They claimed that, since those slaves had been disposed of after control of Freetown had been transferred to the British government, it was a matter for Ministers of the government. Perronet later claimed that the directors' mistake was to argue that, while it was wrong to

make employers pay for recaptured slaves, their payments could be considered as '*premiums for apprenticeships*'. This showed their connivance in this scandal of disguised slavery.

Thornton had written privately to Perronet, disagreeing with his proposal that the money employers had paid for apprentices should be returned to the employers. Wilberforce also wrote, arguing that acceptance of the apprenticeship system had been necessary to ensure the passage of the Abolition Act through Parliament and suggesting that, had Perronet faced the same situation (of having to allow something you do not agree with, for the sake of a more important objective) he might have done the same.

Two months later Wilberforce penned another letter to Perronet, this time agreeing with '*the unanimous and clear Judgment and wish of so many Men of superior Understandings, Experience, Integrity, and Candour*' [the directors of the Company], and warning him to be careful in word and action to '*prevent public discredit.*' He was also concerned about the impact on Perronet's parents, of whom he was very fond, and damage to Perronet's reputation.

## Defiance and perseverance

Perronet was not daunted by his abrupt dismissal. By April 1809 he knew that the directors of the Company had advised the British government to 'recall' (sack) him. During the months it took for the official letter to arrive in Sierra Leone, he redoubled his efforts to improve the colony. He wrote to Nancy, '*Since the news of going home I have manufactured the foundations of three new towns to their [his enemies'] exceeding great annoyance.*' [2; p.54] He also hoped that '*contrary winds*' would delay the ship bringing his successor, '*till our people get their land sowed.*' Fate granted his wish: his successor's arrival was delayed by ten months until February 1810; time well used

by Perronet to improve living conditions in the colony.

He worked tirelessly and did not escape contracting a 'fever'. During one bout he was dosed with so much calomel that his front teeth fell out -- the medicine made the patient salivate, to 'suck out' the fever. He never had the teeth replaced. Money meant no more to him than his personal appearance: his entire salary and some of his father's money was spent on the colony.

## Public and personal rifts

When told that his father had disowned him he said that for a man to be honest he has to act according to what he thinks is right, without '*waiting for instructions from parents or anyone else.*' And he meant what he said, in matters personal as well as political: ten months after his return to England, he and Nancy eloped from York in the dead of night and were married in London in March 1811. The elopement resulted from the refusal of their fathers to agree to the couple's engagement. It was a happy and successful marriage, producing six children.

After his return to England in May 1810 Perronet demanded a full public inquiry into his recall, as well as his salary for his time at sea, which with his usual mathematical application he calculated to be £392 14s 11 1/4d. No inquiry was held, and he was told that his dismissal meant that he would not be paid. He met with Wilberforce, who would neither discuss Perronet's actions in Sierra Leone nor agree to Perronet's suggestion of a debate in the House of Commons about whether the Abolition Act had not resulted in a new form of slavery.

Perronet commented bitterly to Nancy that

*Mr W. has thought that a little slavery might be connived at, a little breaking of a few Acts of Parliament*

*so long as the slaves were made good Christians in return for it, and that has been the Delilah that seduced him....Yet I view him not with malice, but with more pity than it were perhaps good for him to know* [5; p. 348].

His father, torn between his son's desire for support in the dispute and his long and close friendship with Wilberforce, decided that he disapproved of Perronet's actions and would not help. This meant that he had hardly enough money to live on, especially with a wife to support. Nancy returned to her parents for the birth of their first child, and Perronet wrote to a friend that *'I shall actually have to appeal to my Father to clear me of some small debts instead of living on my savings'* [2; p.67]. A cousin of Perronet's intervened by sending Mrs Thompson copies of (presumably) complimentary addresses to Perronet which he had received from important inhabitants of Sierra Leone. Soon afterwards Perronet was given a half-yearly allowance from his father [2; p.71].

He returned to Queens' College to write his *Narrative of Facts* in order to defend his actions during his governorship. He strongly attacked what he saw as the corruption of some of the employees of the Company and, in their communications with the directors in London, their misleading accounts of what they were doing.

## Final verdicts

Future events in Sierra Leone showed that Perronet's policies were right. The slave trade he had so determinedly tried to stamp out continued into the 1830s; had the British government supported him, thousands would have been saved from slavery. Also, as Turner writes in [5], Perronet's plans and ideas for economic development—the importance of agriculture, the settlement

of freed slaves to farm the land, land grants with secure tenure (ownership or rent), trade and a good labour system for Africa—were later used. His peace treaties with native tribes were followed up. Perronet left a lasting impression on former slaves in Sierra Leone; in October 1830 some Jamaican ex-slaves sought his help with a petition to Queen Victoria for their return to Jamaica. Even in the 1860s, more than fifty years after leaving Sierra Leone, he was still contributing letters to *The Anti-Slavery Reporter*.

Two short comments, made much later, sum up Perronet's governorship: he was *'more vigorous than was pleasing to the Home Government in putting down the slave trade'* (obituary, Leeds Mercury, 9 September 1869) and *'too intellectual and scrupulous to make a good colonial administrator'* (comment in a 1972 article). Intellectual, scrupulous and vigorous, he was also courageous and resolute in a great cause, in the face of powerful interests, family ties and the loss of influential friends.

In 1979 Hull twinned with Freetown in Sierra Leone. The stated purpose of the twinning is to:

*promote friendship and understanding between the cities of Kingston upon Hull and Freetown: strengthen commercial, educational and cultural links between the two cities and stimulate and foster mutual exchanges at all levels between the peoples of the two cities.*

These are ideals that Perronet Thompson would have endorsed wholeheartedly.

## Life after Sierra Leone

Perronet had many varied, passionate interests, leaving his mark in many spheres. He returned to active military duty in October 1812, served in the Peninsular

campaign, and was then sent to Bombay in 1815 as interpreter and adviser to the army. He learnt Arabic and when a treaty was drawn up in 1820 between the United Kingdom and the chieftains in the Persian Gulf, he insisted on a Clause forbidding the slave trade in the area, terming it plunder and piracy.

## Political journalist

Back in London early in 1823, Perronet quickly became involved in political writing, which was to remain a passion. Through his close friendship with John Bowring he wrote articles for the influential radical journal *The Westminster Review*; in one article he defined political economy simply as *'the art of preventing ourselves from being plundered by our betters'*.

His opposition to slavery was unceasing. In another article (*Westminster Review*, No. XI, October 1829, p. 275) he wrote angrily that

*the colonists [plantation owners] have tried to frighten the government and the country, by holding out the necessity that, in the event of the emancipation of their slaves they should be paid for them; and some of the friends of emancipation have been weak enough to show an inclination to admit the principle.*

In a scathing refutation of claims by an American writer that black people were inferior, Perronet predicted that there would never be any good for the Americans until they have a black president, and that *'it may be sooner than some people think'* (*Westminster Review*, No. XX, January 1834, p. 177).

He associated with many radical thinkers and writers. He published several articles as pamphlets (anonymously, while a serving soldier). The most important was

*Catechism of the Corn Laws*. In this he argued for free international trade, which had been badly affected by the Napoleonic Wars. He opposed landowners' insistence on duties (taxes) on imported corn, and the resulting high price of bread, which led to hunger and much resentment among the poor. It was one of two articles which caused much discussion, including debates in Parliament, but the hated Corn Laws were only repealed in the late 1840s, after the Irish potato famine.

Perronet became wealthy upon inheriting his father's estate in 1828 and withdrew from active military service to devote himself to political journalism. He bought a half-share of the *Westminster Review* and was joint editor with Bowring, although Perronet did most of the work. He wrote articles on topics such as Catholic Emancipation, slavery in the West Indies, the cause of the Jews in England, and further attacks on the Corn Laws. In January 1830, in the article *Radical Reform* (later a pamphlet) he campaigned for the extension of the right to vote. This ambition was only partially achieved when the right to vote was extended to middle-class property owners in the Great Reform Act of 1832.

Perronet was well aware of the limitations the Act and continued throughout his life to press for universal suffrage (all adults to be allowed to vote) which for him clearly included votes for women. His insistence on the case for women's suffrage later caused a falling out with Bowring. Campaigns for women's suffrage gained strength only in the 1860s, his final decade, but its supporters were well aware of their debt to Perronet. In a lecture delivered on 24 February 1869 to the Clifton and Bristol Society for Women's Suffrage, Prof F. W. Newman approvingly quotes the *'plain spoken statesman of vigorous and original thought'* Perronet Thompson. In 1841 Perronet had written

*Half the follies, half the brutalities,*

*committed by nations, and for which they have paid the price in long arrears of punishment and suffering, would have been prevented, if they had been presented to the ordeal of the right-minded and clear-headed Women of the land. When real necessities occur to nations, Women have never been found deficient in the virtues which such times demand.*

## Member of Parliament

Having disdained a Parliamentary career, Perronet changed his mind a year later, when there was a new government opposed to the Reform Bill. He sold the *Westminster Review*, stood unsuccessfully as a candidate in Preston, Lancashire, but won a by-election in Hull in 1835 by five votes, surviving a petition (costly to both sides) to the House by the defeated Tory candidate. Rather than contest the seat again in 1837, Perronet stood in Maidstone, Kent, where he lost to the young Benjamin Disraeli, a future Prime Minister. It would be a further ten years before Perronet was again elected to Parliament, although he contested several elections during that period. In 1847 he entered Parliament as the Member for Bradford, serving until 1852, and again in 1857-59.

Diligent in informing his constituents, he sent letters twice weekly for publication in friendly local newspapers (the *Hull Advertiser* and *Hull Rockingham*), seeking to involve his constituencies actively. His unwavering emphasis on the repeal of the Corn Laws led to clashes with less single-minded Liberal and Radical MPs. He supported the aims of *'Universal suffrage, equal representation, free election of representatives without reference to property, the [secret] Ballot and short Parliaments of fixed duration, the limit not to exceed three years'* [1].

However, by 1837 he had neither his Parliamentary seat nor the *'Review'*. Perronet added *'total freedom of the Press'* and the demand for *'a secular system of education'* to the causes he supported. His frustrating decade out of Parliament was dominated by his work for the Anti-Corn Law League. He continued his practice of involving his constituents; yet his insistence on his principles meant that he was often unable to win round other MPs. His speeches outside the House of Commons were more influential and his pamphlets widely read.

## Critic of Empire

Perronet's experiences in Sierra Leone, India and the Persian Gulf convinced him that, while accepting the reality of empire, *'the imperial relationship should not be one-sided. It had to rest on mutual benefits, not coercion and exploitation'* [6; para 7]. Unlike many people at that time, he did not believe that some races were superior to others, and demanded respect for the rights and customs of native peoples in the colonies. In response to the Maori wars in New Zealand in the 1840s he attacked the government for breaking previous pledges to the Maoris, and argued (in vain) for negotiation and co-operation rather than continual conflict.

After the Indian Mutiny of 1857, which was caused by the colonial administration's insensitive attitudes to Hinduism and Islam (the local Sepoy troops refused to touch rifle cartridges greased with cow or pig fat, were punished, rebelled violently and were then brutally suppressed), Perronet became the Indian soldiers' main parliamentary supporter. He argued that *'the most important part of the question, the breach of military faith and honour with the soldiers of the Native Indian Army'* had been ignored in the government's reaction. As he explained in further speeches and articles (published as the influential publication *Audi Alteram Partem* - Hear

the Other Side), the promise to the troops upon enlistment, that there would be no interference with their religious practices, had been broken. The Mutiny hardened racist opinions in Britain and Perronet was shouted down in Parliament, while the Indians rightly regarded him as their champion against injustice.

## Other interests

Radical politics absorbed most of Perronet's energies, yet his restless mind found much else to occupy him: natural history fascinated him from a young age, an interest initially nurtured by his family's man-servant (a Methodist class-leader), who *'taught him the names and habits of beasts and birds and plants'* [2; p.4]. In Sierra Leone he found himself daily *'compelled to see objects of natural curiosity'* and he told Nancy that *'A letter would be run off in the presence of two 'alligators' (crocodiles?) in a tub, four snakes, two lizards (iguana) and an otter which had been bitten by one of the 'alligators' [2; p. 55]. Similarly, India aroused his scientific curiosity, with 'elephants, tigers, lions, bears, birds with tails, birds without tails' [2; p.19].*

His academic training led to a lasting interest in the mathematical aspects of musical harmony. In 1829 he published *'Instructions to my daughter for playing on the Enharmonic guitar'*; by 1834 this had led to the construction of an enharmonic organ with 40 notes to the octave, described in detail in the *Review* in 1835. Perronet's invention was featured in the Great Exhibition of 1851. He composed a letter to his daughter on the subject in the morning before he died, aged 86, on 6 September 1869, in London. He is buried in Kensal Green Cemetery.

## Glossary

**American War of Independence:** (1775-1783), war by colonists in America against the British Crown leading to the establishment of the United States of America as an independent nation.

**Bowring, John:** Bowring was a political economist, traveller, miscellaneous writer fluent in several languages, and the 4th Governor of Hong Kong. He and Perronet shared 'a commitment to the cause of liberty abroad' [6; para. 5].

**Calomel:** Calomel is mercury chloride, a dense yellowish-white compound, and was widely used as an internal medicine or laxative in the early nineteenth century, making patients salivate to 'release impurities'.

**Crown colony:** refers to a colony with governor who was appointed by the monarch.

**Delilah:** in the Old Testament of the Bible, she is the woman who led to Samson's downfall.

**Emancipation:** is an effort to establish rights and equality for specific groups, here specifically referring to the freeing of slaves, and (later) political rights for Catholics in England.

**John Wesley:** (1703-91) Anglican priest who, with his brother Charles, founded the evangelical movement now known as Methodism. He argued that Christians could achieve 'holiness' in their lives and experience Christ personally. His followers travelled widely, usually on horseback, and preached outdoors to gain disciples. His writings were later influential in the development of the Pentecostal Church and Holiness Movement, especially in the USA.

**League of Nations Covenant:** The League of Nations was an organisation of many countries, formed in 1919 at the Paris Peace Conference after the First World War. Its Covenant provided a set of principles for international peace and cooperation.

**Napoleonic Wars:** from 1803 to 1815 Britain led a series of coalitions in wars against France, then led by Napoleon, who at various stages had conquered much of Europe. The conflicts were a continuation of wars sparked by the French Revolution in 1789.

**Peninsular campaign:** important campaign in the final stages of the Napoleonic Wars, with the British, led by the Duke of Wellington, gaining control of much of Portugal and Spain.

**political economy:** Now often simply called 'economics', this was the term originally used for the study of production and trade, and how they relate to law and government, and how national wealth and income are distributed among the population.

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# Three Generations of Cookmans: a story of liberty and anti-slavery in Hull and The United States

Robb Robinson

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## A Methodist businessman

In the nineteenth century three generations of the Cookman family made a remarkable contribution to the cause of liberty, in the fields of slave emancipation, political reform and religious renewal on both sides of the Atlantic. Their story begins with George Cookman in the East Riding of Yorkshire.

George was born in 1774 at North Cliff Farm, in the parish of Owthorne, in the East Riding of Yorkshire. Both the farm where he was born and St Peter's, the cliff-top parish church where he was baptised, have since been swept away by the fast eroding sea [2; p.1]. Around 1788, when he was thirteen years old, he left home to take up a leather finishing apprenticeship in Hull.

In 1793, whilst still an apprentice, he became a member of the Wesleyan Society, having apparently been deeply influenced by Joseph Benson, regarded as one of John Wesley's foremost preachers, and remained a Methodist for the rest of his life. In 1796 he became a local preacher and for much of the following thirty-three years he rode on horseback around a thirty-mile preaching circuit every Sunday [3; p.20]. George also played a part in the formation of the 'Poor and Stranger's Friend Society' in Hull, described as a gathering of a *'few serious persons united for visiting the poor and distressed, making them acquainted with their best interests, ministering to their bodily wants'* [5; 11 Feb 1797]. Both men and women from the Society, which was active throughout much of the first half of the nineteenth century, visited the homes of those in need around the town.

After completing his apprenticeship George seems soon to have gone into business on his own and subsequently built up a substantial leather finishing company with premises off Anlaby Road. In July 1799 he married Mary Chambers, from Halsham, also a keen Methodist, in Hull's Holy Trinity Church. The first of their three children, christened George Grimston, was born in November 1800.

## Radical convictions

George was more than a successful Methodist businessman; he became known for his strong political views. He and his young family were noted for their strong opposition to slavery and their support for William Wilberforce and the anti-slavery movement. But George was far more radical than Wilberforce in his overall political outlook, being described by his eldest son, at a later date, as being *'independent in his feelings, even to the verge of republicanism'* [8; p.2]. Such radical views found little favour amongst the political establishment in the repressive period following the Napoleonic wars. But political pressures for change, which built up during the later 1820s, eventually led to the passage of the Great Reform Act giving the vote to male middle-class property owners. Typically for George, this did not go far enough and he later expressed on a number of occasions his disappointment that more people were not enfranchised by the 1832 Act.

## A local politician

He was also disappointed that the requirement for a secret ballot was not included in the legislation and in fact did not become law until 1872 [2; p.68], [6; 3

Dec 1839]. Nevertheless, after the passage of the Great Reform Act, George was soon in a position to put some of his political ideas into practice. When elections were held for the first time for a new, reformed, Corporation (City Council), George Cookman was amongst the new wave of more radical councillors elected. Now he was very much in the mainstream of local politics and civic life. He was prominent amongst those who raised funds for Hull's now famous Wilberforce Monument, became a Justice of the Peace and played a major role in the town for the rest of his life, occupying the position of mayor for two years in a row, from 1837. He kept his strong links with the abolitionists and in 1837, for example, he attended an anti-slavery meeting in the Mechanics Institute, in his capacity of mayor. He moved a vote of thanks after an address by R.M. Beverley on the injustices of the apprenticeship system for supposedly freed slaves.

## Supporting the Radicals

During the later 1830s and beyond, George championed a range of radical causes. In 1835 he supported the locally born radical politician Thomas Perronet Thompson's (see Chapter 4) narrow parliamentary election victory in the town [6; 20 June 1835]. In 1836 he was amongst those locals involved in petitioning Parliament in a call for a total repeal of stamp duties (taxes) on newspapers [6; 12 Feb 1836]. The Hull petition was in support of the radical Francis Place, who led the parliamentary repeal campaign. George was passionate in his support for Place's campaign, stating that he considered the tax *'unjust and impolitic...inasmuch as it has a direct tendency to perpetuate ignorance amongst the people, especially the poor and working classes in the community.'* In the event, the 1830s repeal campaign failed but such duties, which artificially raised the cost of newspapers, were finally repealed in 1855, a few months before George's death.

George was also prominent, as Peronnet Thompson had been, in his support for the repeal of the Corn Laws, and played key roles in supporting wider economic and social change. He was a prominent supporter of the building and early operation of the Hull to Selby Railway, opened in 1840, and took a close interest in housing conditions and public health issues during the subsequent decades [6; 6 Mar 1840].

## The son in America

Meanwhile, George's eldest son, George Grimston, was encouraged by both parents, when growing up, to read widely—especially history books—and he had started work in his father's business whilst still in his teens. He too was a strong supporter and admirer of Wilberforce and the anti-slavery campaign and later named one of his children William Wilberforce Cookman. In 1821, young George was sent by his father on a business trip to relations in North America and whilst there he witnessed slavery at first hand. This clearly had a profound effect on him and he apparently resolved to preach the gospel and play some part in the emancipation of slaves in the southern states of the USA [7; p.5].

Back in England he discussed his plans with both parents and came to an agreement with his father that he would stay working for the family firm until he was twenty-five, then take up the Methodist Ministry, but in America, not Britain. During the years before his move to the USA he became an accomplished lay preacher. In an age of great public orators he developed a reputation for speaking, soon being described as a *'prince amongst platform orators'* [8; p. 12]. He was filled with a passion for his mission and the anti-slavery cause; shortly before sailing he is said to have noted that *'my heart exults to reflect that in a few months I may be permitted to preach Christ crucified to the poor blacks*

of Maryland' [8; p. 14].

George Grimston emigrated to Philadelphia in spring 1825 and the following year became a minister of the Methodist Episcopal Church, returning only briefly to England in 1827 to marry Mary Barton, from Doncaster [6; 10 April 1827].

## Chaplain to the Senate

The preaching skills that George Grimston had nurtured in Hull were used to considerable effect in his American ministry. He earned a deserved reputation as a riveting orator and attracted large crowds wherever he spoke. Soon his circuit covered a whole county and his audiences included white and black alike. Though he developed a wide network of white friends and admirers in the southern states, he was continually affected by the all too apparent presence of slavery, as the celebrated author and former slave Frederick Douglass later wrote in his book *My Bondage and Freedom*:

*We slaves loved Mr. Cookman. We believed him to be a good man. We thought him instrumental in getting Mr. Samuel Harrison, a very rich slaveholder, to emancipate his slaves; and by some means got the impression that he was laboring to effect the emancipation of all the slaves. When he was at our house, we were sure to be called in to prayers. When the others were there, we were sometimes called in and sometimes not. Mr. Cookman took more notice of us than either of the other ministers. He could not come among us without betraying his sympathy for us, and, stupid as we were, we had the sagacity to see*

it [4; p.63].

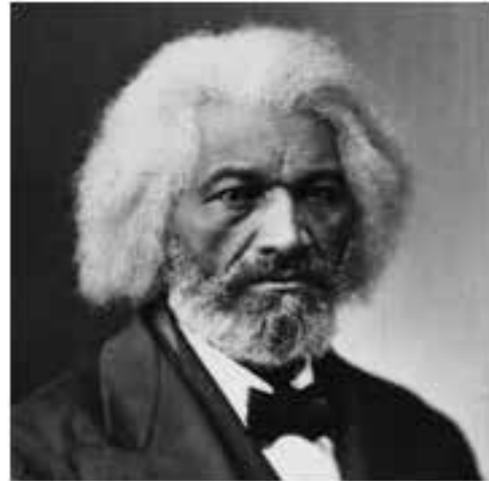


Fig 5.1  
Frederick Douglass, Civil Rights Activist

By 1838 George Grimston and his wife Mary, together with their five young children, moved to Washington, where he was stationed at Wesley Chapel, quite close to the Capitol. His reputation drew large crowds and his congregation included many members of Congress. Not long afterwards, he was elected Chaplain to the Senate. This was an old post by US constitutional standards, having been created when Senate had first convened in New York in 1789, and chaplains of all denominations had subsequently served in the role.

At this time the Cookmans, father and son, were at the peak of their political careers and for a short time father and son occupied concurrently and respectively the offices of Mayor of Hull and Chaplain to the US Senate, where the latter's preaching was regularly reported in the press and continued to attract politicians of all political opinions.

## Tragedy strikes

George senior had paid a visit to Philadelphia to see his son and young family in 1831 [6; 22 Nov 1831], but had not seen them since. When George Grimston's term of office ended in 1841 he determined to make a trip back home to visit his ageing

father. By this time George, a widower since Mary's death in 1829, having no family left to take over the business, as his other son had died and his daughter had emigrated to South Africa, had sold his business and settled into Stepney Lodge (now the site of Beverley Road Baths and Stepney Primary School).

Tragedy struck. George Grimston bid his young family farewell and embarked on the steamship *President* in May 1841. Neither the ship nor those on board were ever seen again. No one knows for certain what happened to the vessel, although the common belief is that it sank in violent storms which were raging for days off the North American coast.

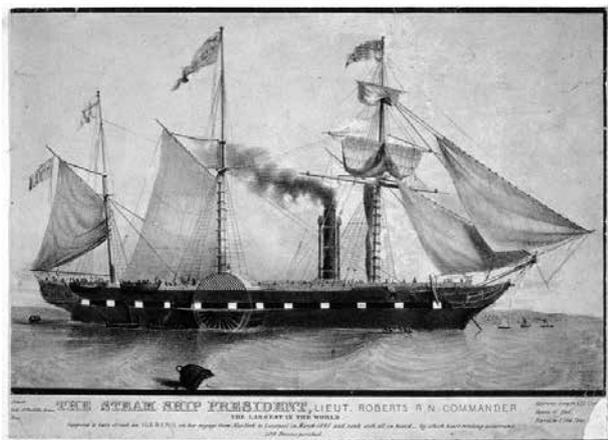


Fig 5.2

The steamship 'President' which disappeared at sea in 1841.

Such a loss brought grief to Cookman family members on both sides of the Atlantic. George senior sought to persuade his distraught daughter-in-law to bring her young family back to England but Mary determined to remain, saying her husband would have wished it. The family moved to a small house in Baltimore, George senior provided support from the UK and his grandchildren were able to continue with their education. The eldest boys, Alfred and George, regularly corresponded by letter with their grandfather and thus they were provided with support and spiritual guidance from both sides of the Atlantic. They, too, were to follow in family footsteps and both eventually became Methodist

ministers, with Alfred embarking on his preaching career from around the age of eighteen in Baltimore [7; p.14].

### Third generation reformer

Over the following couple of decades Alfred was to become one of the most eminent and influential preachers in the USA. He inherited his father's skills as an orator and there was said to be no minister in the Baltimore Episcopal Church circuit who could draw a larger crowd. Throughout this time he remained in regular correspondence with his grandfather and in summer 1850 crossed the Atlantic in the steamer *Europe* to visit him at home in Stepney Lodge, Hull. They evidently got on well and he stayed for more than two months, making his mark amongst Hull's Wesleyan Methodist community when he preached at a number of local chapels, being particularly pleased, in his words, that he '*blew my trumpet in old George Yard where Wesley, Benson and my beloved father have been heard.*'

George senior died in 1856 and was buried in Withernsea Churchyard [2; p.17]. By this time, Alfred had married Annie Brunner, from Columbia, Pennsylvania, and over the following years he took up various ministries on the eastern coastal states of the USA. The family's skills as orators were said to have been inherited more from Alfred's grandmother Mary than from George senior, who was by all accounts a more reserved speaker. What is clear, however, is that Alfred had inherited the Cookman family's long-standing and strong opposition to slavery.



Fig 5.3  
Sketch of Alfred Cookman

## Fighting slavery in the American South

Alfred rose to the peak of his powers and influence at the very time that America's divisions over slavery were widening, and relations between the northern and southern states deteriorated. This growing split was also evident amongst members of the Episcopal Methodist Church, and Alfred was prominent amongst those who wished to see the complete abolition of slavery. In May 1860 he attended the church's General Conference in Buffalo, where a motion to exclude those holding slaves was to be debated [7; pp.25-26]. The motion was passed, to the displeasure of a number of southern white members of the church but, as far as Alfred and his fellow anti-slavery supporters were concerned, the battle lines had been drawn.

The resultant split in the Methodist Episcopal Church reflected the political fault lines of the United States. This became even wider after the election in 1861 of Abraham Lincoln, a known opponent of slavery, as President of the United States of America.

After the outbreak of the American Civil War, Alfred moved to New York. The following summer, at an immense war gathering held in Lancaster, he made a passionately patriotic speech, praising the

values of the union:

*This union, which is so unutterably dear to our hearts, is at the present time in imminent peril...a government closely connected with the cause of liberty throughout the world...must be preserved and perpetuated in all its purity and integrity. (Cheers) [8; pp.151-152].*

## Slavery ends at last

In January 1863 President Lincoln issued his famous Emancipation Proclamation. All slaves were declared to be free. Although the justice and practicality of this were questioned by some in the northern states at the time, the New York Episcopal Methodists soon showed their strong public support for the move, at a conference held in Washington Square Church. Here, Alfred was at the forefront of Lincoln's champions and he prepared a war report, which was adopted with little opposition. This contained ten resolutions declaring unconditional support and loyalty to the USA and Unionist cause. The Fifth Resolution declared:

*That slavery is an evil, incompatible in its spirit and practice with the principles of Christianity, with republican institutions, with the peace and prosperity of our country, and with the traditions, doctrines and discipline of our Church. [8; pp. 154-156].*

Abraham Lincoln was later to say that no church did so much to support the Government in its efforts to maintain the Union as did the Methodist ministers.

In early 1864 Alfred visited the Army of the Potomac in its winter quarters on

the front, preaching and, although not in good health, he covered a great deal of ground, spending four weeks riding over country made desolate by the actions of war. After the Civil War ended, Alfred remained a leader in the campaign, this time as a supporter of granting full rights of citizenship to freed slaves and of providing opportunities for improving their lives through education:

*It must be left to Providence and to the colored people themselves. We cannot force them away; it would be unwise, unkind, unchristian and to colonize as we have been doing is like emptying a river by taking out a bucketful every now and then. Let us live for the present, faithfully discharging the duty of the passing hour which is to educate and elevate a people whose unrequited labor, multiplied wrongs, tedious bondage and deep degradations give them a special claim upon us. Give them the spelling book, the bible, equal rights before the law and the electoral franchise as their weapons of defence and then leave all the rest to God [8; p.186].*

## **Alfred's memorial: the Cookman Institute**

During the remainder of the 1860s Alfred Cookman was a prominent member of the Holiness Movement. He proved an enthusiastic supporter of Methodist summer camps and regularly preached at these gatherings. His family eventually moved to New Jersey, where he acquired a summer cottage on the edge of the ocean. By now his health was failing, although he continued to preach and to visit summer camps almost to the end. One of his

last sermons was attended by President Ulysses Simpson Grant in October 1871. He died the following month at the age of forty-three and was interred in Laurel Hill Cemetery, Philadelphia, one of the most revered resting places in the USA.

The Cookman name did not die with Alfred. The summer cottage retreat eventually became part of Asbury Park, named after Francis Asbury, whom Wesley had sent to take the Wesleyan message to the USA. One of the main streets of the resort—now often associated with Bruce Springsteen—is called Cookman Avenue. Yet the most significant reminder of Alfred Cookman is in Florida. Before he died, Alfred is said to have given money towards the construction of the first building of the Cookman Institute [1]. Named after Alfred and opened in Jacksonville in 1872 by the Reverend Alfred Darnell, the Cookman Institute, affectionately known as *Old Cooky*, was the first institute of higher education for blacks in the state of Florida. In 1924 it was merged with the Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute of Daytona Beach, which had been founded for Negro girls in 1904 by Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune. It is now known as Bethune-Cookman University and today provides a distant but lasting reminder of nineteenth-century Methodism, liberty and Hull's anti-slavery movement [9].



Fig 5.4  
The Cookman Institute, Jacksonville, Florida,  
founded 1872.

## Glossary

**Abraham Lincoln:** (1809-65) one of America's most revered Presidents, Lincoln served from 1861 until his assassination in 1865. A powerful orator, he campaigned for the emancipation of slaves. Seven Southern States reacted to his election by forming the Confederacy, and civil war raged for four years. Six days after the South's final surrender Lincoln was assassinated by John Wilkes Booth.

**American Civil War:** (1861-65) originated in the conflict over slavery, with seven Southern States breaking away. Over 600,000 soldiers died in four years of bitter civil war, which ended in defeat for the South and the emancipation of all slaves in the USA.

**Corn Laws:** between 1815 and 1846 Parliament, under pressure from landowners, maintained laws that imposed high import duties on grain from abroad, resulting in high prices for bread. This was much resented in towns and cities and led to famine, protests and riots.

**Great Reform Act:** the Act gave the vote to all men who owned property worth at least £10 (a significant sum at the time), and did away with 'rotten boroughs' (where in some cases seven voters elected two MPs, while major cities like Manchester elected none).

**John Wesley:** (1703-91) Anglican priest who, with his brother Charles, founded the evangelical movement now known as Methodism. He argued that Christians could achieve 'holiness' in their lives and experience Christ personally. His followers travelled widely, usually on horseback, and preached outdoors to gain disciples. His writings were later influential in the development of the Pentecostal Church and Holiness Movement, especially in the USA.

**Methodist Episcopal Church:** development of Methodism in the USA, founded as a church in 1784.

**Union(ist):** in the USA the Union were the American states. In the Civil War the Unionist forces were those loyal to Lincoln, and the Confederates were the forces of the breakaway states.

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# Mary Murdoch: Hull's 'Lady Doctor'

Marie Holmes

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## Worker for women's rights

Hull and Human Rights—If you were asked to name someone who met both of those labels, how would you answer? William Wilberforce's name would probably be the one that most people would give because of his well documented campaign to abolish the slave trade.

A less well-known individual with links to Hull, who campaigned for human rights all her life, is Dr Mary Murdoch. Although not born in Hull, she made a significant impact in the town: as a doctor and a campaigner for the suffrage (for women to be granted the right to vote in national elections). Mary holds the distinction of being the first woman General Practitioner (GP) in Hull, a role in which she strove to improve living and health conditions for the people of the town. She also used her home and surgery on Beverley Road to hold meetings to organise the suffrage campaign and promote the involvement of women in activities and careers outside the traditional domestic sphere.

## Early life

Mary Charlotte Murdoch was born in Elgin, Scotland, on 26 September 1864. She was the youngest of seven children born to Jane and William Murdoch. Her father, a solicitor, died when she was twelve, leaving her mother with the sole responsibility of raising and educating the children. Hope Malleon, in her biography of Mary, published three years after Mary's death, writes:

*She [Mrs Murdoch]...did not bring up her daughters to think of*

*earning their livelihood or prepare themselves for any career save that of domesticity and marriage, and the life her youngest daughter chose would have evoked no sympathy from her had she lived to know of it [2; p.4].*

Mary was first educated at home by a governess, then at a local school, and when she was fifteen she was sent to Manor Mount Girls' Collegiate School, at Forest Hill, London. She was described as a gifted scholar during her schooldays, and prepared to stand up for the rights of others—perhaps an early indication of a trait that would be apparent in her work in her adult life.



Fig 6.1  
Mary Murdoch as a young girl

Her time at the girls' school ended when she became ill, probably from a gastric ailment which would recur throughout her life but which did not, her headmistress recalled,

prevent her from being *'as active in body as in mind'* [2; p.10]. She then attended a girls' school in Switzerland, learnt Italian, became a good French scholar and travelled around Italy. At nineteen, like a dutiful daughter of those times, she returned to Elgin to live at home. She would spend the next four years there, the latter two caring for her sick mother. Later she would refer to this time as *'wasted years'*.

## Obstacles to her ambition

Following her mother's death Mary used a small inheritance she had received to move to London and in 1888 she entered the London School of Medicine for Women. It seemed that the idea of studying medicine had arisen from an article she had read about the need for women doctors in India. However, opportunities for women to study medicine were restricted at this time. Indeed, for a woman, a career in medicine was often viewed as a *'novelty'*.

Many arguments were put forward about why a woman should not be allowed to have a career in medicine: women did not have the right temperament; there was no call for women doctors. Behind these arguments lay many men's fear of competing with women. Many of these arguments and fears mirrored those put forward about why women should not have the right to vote. But many women like Mary worked to overcome society's restrictions and pave the way for future generations of women to pursue careers not only in medicine but other areas previously denied to women.

## Training in London

Despite another bout of illness, Mary was, by all accounts, an exceptional, enthusiastic and hard-working student. Besides her medical training, she also maintained her keen interest in new ideas by reading and attending lectures on a wide variety of

subjects, including women's suffrage.

On completion of her studies she worked for a short period in London and in 1893 she applied for the post of house-surgeon in the Victoria Hospital for Sick Children, in Hull. She was appointed, and the two years she spent at this hospital, *'one of the very few in Great Britain which welcomed women on its staff...gave her a great insight into the diseases of children.'* She moved back to a job in London but resigned that post due to ill health and returned to work in Hull in 1896, *'...at the urgent wish of friends she had made there'* [2; p.27].



Fig 6.2  
Victoria Hospital for Sick Children



Fig 6.3

Mary Murdoch's Beverley Road surgery today

## Settling in Hull

Her surgery was initially on Spring Bank but she later moved to larger premises at 102 Beverley Road as so many patients came to be treated by her. She also had consulting rooms in Grimsby and was appointed Honorary Assistant Physician to the Victoria Hospital for Sick Children, later Honorary Senior Physician, having become an acknowledged expert in the diseases of children. Her interest in the welfare of children extended to their rights, at a time when there were still instances of child labour and other exploitation of children in the United Kingdom. In a lecture, she says:

*A great moral awakening is going on amongst us about children and their rights, and now that we are awake we women in particular must be up and doing and see that the children of the twentieth century surpass in every way all the generations of*

*the past that have gone before [2; p.203].*

She was a determined and practical woman, not afraid of a challenge, and she often worked long hours at her medical practice and for the hospital's outpatients service. *'The doctor, her car [she was one of the first women in Hull to own and drive a car] and her little dogs, became one of the most familiar sights in the streets of Hull and the most welcome' [2; p.32].*



Fig 6.4

Mary Murdoch at work in her study

## Taking up the cause

But Mary was not only an outstanding and successful doctor; she was also interested in politics and in the women's suffrage campaign. This issue of the vote for women was of great importance to her. She writes: *'I can't keep out of it, God planted the seed in me when I was born and I have watered it freely. Both my voice and my purse are at the service of the movement' [2; p.87].* Her active involvement was inspired by her close friend Dr Louisa Martindale, who championed the improvement of the status of women in every field.

In 1900, when Louisa qualified as a doctor, Mary had offered her the post of an assistant in her medical practice. Louisa accepted, aware that to work with such an outstanding GP would provide valuable experience. When Louisa arrived to share Mary's work and live in her house they

began a campaign for the vote for women. In her book *Rebel Girls: Their Fight for the Vote*, Jill Liddington writes: *'It became a shared crusade, and they set about rousing Hull'* [1; p.170].

They started a Women's Suffrage Society, holding all the committee meetings in Mary's house. In 1897 many suffrage societies in Britain had merged to form the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) with the aim of gaining the vote for women 'as it was and may be' given to men. This would limit women's franchise, as it then was, to those with the required property qualifications, but it was thought that this plan would gain more support initially and lead eventually to a wider franchise.

The members, called suffragists, wanted to achieve their aim by legal and peaceful means, constitutionally. They campaigned by holding public meetings, presenting petitions to Parliament, writing letters to politicians, lobbying sympathetic Members of Parliament to sponsor Private Members' Bills for granting women the right to vote, publishing newspapers and distributing free literature.

## Spreading the message

The Hull branch of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) was established in 1904 with Mary as its founding president. The Hull branch *'was active and effective from the start: the branch held monthly discussion meetings which soon attracted 200 members, formed satellite branches in neighbouring towns like Beverley, and presented a petition from the women of Hull to the House of Commons'* [1; p.171].

After Louisa left Hull in 1906, Mary continued to campaign for the suffrage. She inspired ten local women to stand for election as Poor Law Guardians (these were Boards administering workhouses established by

the 1834 Poor Law) and another stood for election as a city councillor. Indeed, she considered herself a driving force in highlighting the campaign in Hull and that if she had not acted many would not have been aware there was a campaign. She declared: *'If you don't belong to a suffrage society join one tomorrow, because if you are not represented in the affairs of your country, your work is not of so much value'* [2; p.177].

Mary travelled to local towns to gather more support and was often a NUWSS branch delegate on trips to London. These activities entailed much public speaking. She wrote: *'I longed at one time to be a preacher, and that is why I speak sometimes when I think I have a message'* [2; p.89]. She would probably have been aware of a speech made by a delegate to a suffrage societies conference in 1896:

*And what chance, I ask you, have we of getting Women's Suffrage, or of having numbers of women at elections pressing MPs for the suffrage, when we have all that much country unconcerned about it—unconverted? And how shall they hear without a preacher?* [4; p.68].

And Mary preached messages, spreading the word about women's suffrage, as well as practical and inspirational ones on medical matters and the education and advancement of women, some of which were published in Appendix II of Malleson's biography.

These activities were fitted in around the demands of her medical practice as, often fortifying herself with *'two raw eggs quickly swallowed'*, she prepared for an afternoon or evening's meeting or campaign. She wrote: *'I never have time to copy out or rearrange my things; I just sit down and*

*make a few notes of the form I want it to take, then think a little, then reel the thing straight off* [2; p.90].

## **A split in the movement**

Meanwhile, in 1903, Emmeline Pankhurst, along with two of her daughters, Christabel and Sylvia, who were all members of the NUWSS, left the organisation and formed the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). They were dissatisfied with the failure of the NUWSS to persuade Parliament to grant the vote to women and with its campaign strategy. Like the NUWSS, they wanted voting rights that were equal to those of men, under the existing franchise laws. Again, this meant that only middle-class women who met the property qualification would be granted the vote; this was criticised by anti-suffrage campaigners as demanding 'Votes for Ladies', not Votes for Women. Although many of the women in both groups came from middle- and upper-class backgrounds, radicals in both groups actively sought the participation of working-class women, as exemplified by Annie Kenney (a mill worker) and Mary Gawthorpe (a teacher from a working-class family), who held positions of responsibility in the WSPU.

'Deeds not Words' was the WSPU slogan, and in 1905 what was considered the first militant act took place: at a Liberal Party meeting in Manchester, Christabel Pankhurst and Annie Kenney interrupted Winston Churchill and Sir Edward Grey to ask whether they supported women's right to vote. At that time it was the custom for speakers to be listened to politely and in silence, even if you did not agree with them. When the women were ejected violently from the hall they began to hold a protest meeting outside and were arrested for obstruction. Their subsequent imprisonment for not paying the fine imposed gained the WSPU much public support. As a result of the WSPU's militant

actions, *The Daily Mail* coined the word 'suffragettes' to distinguish them from the suffragists; the WSPU members did not mind the derisive diminutive: pronouncing the word with a hard 'g' indicated that they meant women to *get* the vote.

It was not unusual for women to be supportive of more than one group in the campaigns to win the vote; in many branch societies there were members who belonged to both the NUWSS and the WSPU. However, there is an accepted view that the NUWSS were the more peaceful protesters—'suffragists'—and that the WSPU were more militant—'suffragettes'—and these terms have been used by historians to differentiate between the types of campaigning undertaken by the women.

During its first few years the WSPU continued with the tactics of heckling prominent politicians, holding their own meetings and sending deputations to see the Prime Minister. The suffragettes' actions attracted the attention of the public to the cause, and the membership of both groups, especially that of the NUWSS, grew. The suffragists acknowledged the achievements of the WSPU and '*...although the NUWSS never sanctioned militancy, the suffragists and the suffragettes worked together relatively harmoniously during the first few years of the WSPU's existence*' [4: p.96].

## **New campaign tactics**

In 1907 the NUWSS employed new campaign tactics. During elections they had a non-party policy, supporting candidates, whatever their party affiliation, who advocated the vote for women. They rented shops in the towns in order to display and sell their literature and give information. They covered walls with notices, organised processions, gave out leaflets and held meetings.

*Their speakers often attracted such large audiences that the candidates' meetings were almost deserted, and this was especially to be desired when an 'anti' [a candidate opposed to women's suffrage] was addressing his electors [2; p. 92].*

The campaigns were highly visual, using novel ways to highlight the cause, for example, producing card games which used the names of prominent women in the suffrage movement or making dolls in their likeness. Choirs were also formed to sing suffrage songs.



Fig 6.5

Suffrage doll used to promote NUWSS campaigns

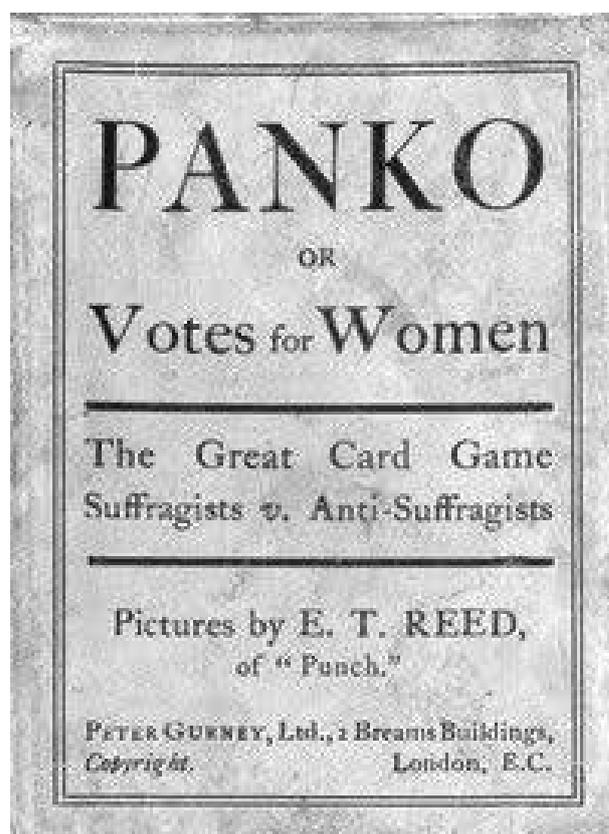


Fig 6.6

Suffrage card game used to promote NUWSS campaigns

Mary took part energetically and theatrically in these campaigns. In November 1907 when a by-election in the Hull West constituency was announced she wrote:

*Tomorrow is the nomination day, when the candidates go to the Town Hall. I am going to drive through all the chief streets in a brake with a pair of chestnut horses to show them women mean to be in it [the election]. My seat on the box is very high, like a Highland coach, right over the horses. They are carrying the colours; my whip, with streamers of red, white, and green [suffrage colours] advertising our big meeting...Even the dogs are wearing the colours [2; p. 93].*

(The colours used in all forms of publicity by the NUWSS were red,

white and green, while purple, white and green were used by the WSPU in their campaigns.)

Liddington comments: *'Hull West took suffrage by-election choreography to new heights'* [4; p.174].

At a meeting around this time she *'had to reduce some fidgety youths at the back to order; they had come to scoff but remained to help, and signed the petition.'* Also, she was *'down in the hall afterwards with my hand on the shoulder of the dirtiest man in the room, trying to convince him that his wife had a mind!...a doctor's training is so wonderful that there is nothing in the world too dirty and too unclean for him to touch if he can help'* [2; p. 94].

## Hecklers in Hull

During this by-election campaign Emmeline Pankhurst, a crowd-pulling speaker at by-election campaigns, visited Hull, as did her daughter Adela, to check that the party candidates would support the granting of the vote to women. In contrast to the NUWSS, the WSPU's policy was to oppose Liberal Party candidates because of their ruling party's failure to grant women the vote, and to oppose Labour Party candidates because the party had refused to include women's suffrage in its programme (although, five years later, in 1912, the Labour Party declared its support for women's suffrage). She was soon followed by Mary Gawthorpe, a member of the national committee, who arrived in Hull to try to form a branch of the WSPU.

At a packed public meeting, organised by the Hull branch of the NUWSS, to which the Labour and Liberal candidates in the by-election were invited and which Mary Murdoch chaired, the differences between the NUWSS and the WSPU in policy towards support for political parties and their different campaign tactics became

apparent. Mary Gawthorpe, from her seat in the front row, began to heckle the Liberal candidate, whom she accused of not being fully committed, if elected, to support the franchise for women.

As the Liberal candidate *'picked up his hat "ready for escaping"'* when confronted by Gawthorpe's hostile questioning, and some suffragettes began to leave, Murdoch ruled that no more questions be asked of the candidate. She explained that the NUWSS was non-political, supporting both the Labour and Liberal candidates because both had promised to support the franchise for women. In the end, the Liberal candidate won the election and Gawthorpe's efforts to establish a branch of the WSPU were unsuccessful. Nonetheless, as Liddington notes: *'...the Hull West contest showed that the suffrage campaign now reached almost right across the kingdom, out even to the fishermen on the North Sea docksides'* [1; p.175].

## Militant action

However, as further Bills to enact women's suffrage were unsuccessful in Parliament, the WSPU's tactics became increasingly militant: civil disobedience, with the aim of provoking arrest; chaining themselves to railings; damaging government and business property; arson (setting fire to the mail in pillar boxes). In 1909 there were hunger strikes by suffragette prisoners in protest at the repeated imprisonment of many of their members and the denial of their demand for status as political prisoners. The public sympathised with them when the authorities began force feeding them so as not to be held responsible for any deaths.

In 1913 the country house of David Lloyd George, Chancellor of the Exchequer, was bombed, despite his support for enfranchising women. Then there was the tragic incident at the Epsom Derby in 1913: Emily Wilding Davison, a WSPU

campaigner, ran across the racecourse in an attempt, it is thought, to attach a suffragette banner to the King's horse, was trampled by it and died of her injuries. In 1914 a campaigner used an axe to slash a painting 'The Rokeby Venus', in the National Gallery, claiming that she was maiming a beautiful woman, just as the government was maiming Emmeline Pankhurst by force feeding her.

At first, the NUWSS admired the courage shown by the militant suffragettes and the publicity their actions brought to the campaign and did not criticise their tactics. However, as the violence escalated, in the hope of forcing Parliament to grant the vote to women, the NUWSS became concerned that these actions were harming the cause and in 1911 it announced publicly that it was dissociating itself from the increasingly militant tactics of the WSPU. Mary disagreed with this response and resigned from her position as president of the Hull branch. She considered it a matter of principle, but she did remain on good terms with the leader of the NUWSS.

## Arguing for the common cause

In an address given in 1912 Mary explained her decision. She referred to the different campaign strategies but believed that, whatever the tactics or methods women employed, there should be loyalty amongst the groups of women working for a common cause (indeed, 'The Common Cause' was the title of a NUWSS journal). She believed that it was wrong to condemn publicly those who used militant tactics. She spoke about tolerance:

*Because our sisters' methods are not exactly the same as ours, do not let us rush wildly into print and proclaim on the housetops how wrong they are. For all we know, their*

*methods may be very much better than ours...We are all fighting for the same great cause; let us each fight as well as we can, with brain and heart and mind. Public dissensions between women do more harm than any hard fighting [2; p. 221].*

She was herself uneasy about the methods the WSPU used. Indeed, at that by-election meeting in 1907, she had been on the receiving end of the direct actions the WSPU employed, when speakers were repeatedly interrupted by its representatives. Gawthorpe would later apologise to Mary for the interruptions. Two years later Mary wrote to a friend that she would not condemn publicly other campaigners for the vote '*...even if death comes. Surely the only proper official course is to grant the suffrage*' [2; p.96].

## Changing allegiances

Mary joined the WSPU and contributed funds, but she did not approve of the autocratic way in which it was run by Emmeline Pankhurst or with its militant policies. She never re-joined the NUWSS. Her decision to become a member of the WSPU, however, may have been more than a question of loyalty to the common cause, and may lie in the difference in ideology (underlying ideas) between the WSPU and the NUWSS. In *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain, 1866-1928*, [4] Sophia van Wingerden explains that the NUWSS:

*...drew strength from the anti-suffrage arguments that men and women were different and argued that precisely because of the differences, women should have the vote...Although the suffragists sought the far-reaching reform of*

*equality...[they] did not challenge the division of humanity into separate spheres at its root. It would be possible to give women the vote without upsetting the notion that women were now, and would remain, wives and mothers, first and foremost [4; pp.102-103].*

(In other words, because of their difference and therefore their particular interests, women should be elected to Parliament to represent those interests and points of view.)

*...The WSPU, on the other hand, tended to reject arguments based on difference. Differences between men and women had been overestimated, they claimed, and in any case, equality was now the goal...Articles in Votes for Women and The Suffragette, the two WSPU periodicals, attempted to...prove woman's ability to enter the public sphere on the same and equal terms with man [4; pp.102-103].*

Mary would have been knowledgeable about these debates about women's role and she may have realised that her public life—as a doctor, a suffragist, and her efforts to encourage and assist women to participate in work outside the domestic sphere—was an example of the new role for women to which the WSPU was committed.

## **Women and work**

While she was campaigning for the enfranchisement of women Mary was also working to advance their participation in the world of work outside the home. Malleon notes that:

*As a doctor, Mary Murdoch had many opportunities of seeing how the spirit of dependence and the shirking of responsibility lowered the nervous stamina of women, quite apart from the injustice of many of the laws under which they lived, and which affected the condition of children. She was a strong advocate for the training that citizenship would give, and always felt that the enfranchisement of women would ameliorate the conditions of women's labour and increase their sense of responsibility, so that there should be less frivolity, gossip, and slander [2; pp. 94-95].*

Mary's concerns clearly echo those expressed by Mary Wollstonecraft (see Chapter 3) a century earlier. In fact, in a speech about the women's movement, she mentions Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin as being among those from whom 'We, too, have caught hold of the helping hand of our dear dead, for whom we must never cease to be thankful' [2; p. 217].

Her encouragement of women into the workplace began from the time she was appointed to the Victoria Hospital for Sick Children, when '*none but women house-physicians and house-surgeons were appointed*' and she unstintingly gave them her knowledge, experience and support. Another doctor noted how Mary helped young girls

*to escape from the bondage of the usual lazy unsatisfying life of the ordinary well-to-do household. An irate husband writes: "Before Dr Murdoch came bothering round I had an obedient household—my*

*wife and daughters obeyed me in every way; but now—one has gone to be nurse in the infirmary, etc., etc.” [2; p. 38].*

In 1905 a Hull branch of the National Union of Women Workers was formed, with Mary as its president, and she later became the national vice-president, representing the organisation at many international conferences. Mary established many projects to educate and support women. She started a crèche for children of women employed in factories, and as a training centre for young girls who wished to become nursemaids or mothers themselves. She founded a School for Mothers, worked at getting women elected to local Councils and took part in a deputation to the government to ask for the appointment of women patrols and police.

## **A new role for men**

In all her activities for the betterment of women’s lives, she was mindful, like Wollstonecraft, of the importance of the new relationship that would have to be forged between men and women:

*Occasionally Dr Murdoch went down to the docks, and, standing upon an overturned box or tub, spoke to an attentive audience of dock labourers. Sometimes she would urge them to hold their babies for two hours every Sunday. It was good for the babies, she said, and in her mind the while was the knowledge of the rest it would be to the tired mothers. Some of the men did her bidding, and took an opportunity afterwards of telling her they had done so [2; p.p. 108-109].*

At the annual conference of the NUWW in 1913, held in Hull, she told the Congress:

*Mothers should not be left to do all the drudgery while fathers take their ease...side by side with our schools for mothers we ought to have schools for fathers, so that both may take their share in this extremely difficult problem—the manufacture of our successors, the coming race. [2; p.126].*

## **Champion of the poor**

Her work as a doctor had of necessity brought Mary into contact with the poor and the conditions in which they lived. She wrote and spoke with personal knowledge and with great sympathy about the urgent need for improvements. In 1910 she had written:

*We don’t look after the houses of the poor yet enough...Now that we have gone to the poor and taken them as our sisters and brothers, I am hoping much may be done. We must go as their equals, and not as their superiors. How they do open their hearts to you when you sit on a corner of their kitchen-tables, and swing your leg there! and when most of your work amongst them is done with your sleeves turned up over your elbows, you seem just a working woman like themselves [2; p. 97].*

In a speech at the NUWW conference in 1911 in Glasgow, Mary expanded on this issue of insanitary living conditions and their effect on health, using statistics from an official pamphlet ‘How the People of Hull are Housed’, published by the Fabian

Society in 1910. She was also speaking from her experience of working in Hull. However, this brought her into direct conflict with the Corporation of Hull and property owners, who were angry at the negative image they believed she had given of the town and accused her of misrepresenting the facts.

Despite attacks by officials, the local press and private and anonymous persons, Mary remained resolute and repeated the points she had made. In speeches she gave in Hull and through written responses printed in the local newspapers, she explained her position and insisted that the facts she had quoted had come from an official source, from her personal experience of dealing with residents in the town and could also be found in the town's own official documents.

*I have been all through the Census and Health Reports of the City for ten years, and verified all the Fabian figures. I little thought my Glasgow speech was going to create such a terrible local bother. I have all the facts and figures, and I am going to repeat my Glasgow paper, and give chapter and verse for all my statistics... [2; p. 101].*

Her statements were confirmed by the compilers of the Fabian pamphlet, and the public were made aware of the seriousness of poor housing conditions. Mary continued to attend national and international conferences, speak out and work for these causes even in the last years of her life when she suffered from recurrent ill health.

## Final years

During these years Mary returned to organised religion, joining the Anglican

faith in 1914. Her biographer comments that:

*As to the religious sanctions for conduct, no one needed them less, for, through whatever phases she passed, she was an idealist... and the instinctive spurning of the ignoble, the mean, or self-seeking, and the obligation towards others and towards her life's work, were the outgrowth of her own character [2; p. 128].*

She died on 20 March 1916, leaving an estate of £2,117 18s 11d (around £90,000 today). The many tributes written at the time of her death indicate that she made a significant impact on those around her. An obituary in *The Lancet* concludes:

*She was an influential personality, she did much valuable public work when physically not equal to the strain, she was a woman of large sympathies, and invariably acted up to the high ideals and there is no doubt that in her the medical profession and women workers have lost an outstanding force for good.*

Her biographer records that:

*Thousands gathered in the streets to testify their sorrow and love as her body was carried to the church from the consulting room in her house, whence no one in need had ever been turned away and friends coming from a distance realised, perhaps for the first time, that she had won the heart of an entire city*

[2; p.1].

Mary's rousing words from a speech she made about women's suffrage may serve as her epitaph:

*Standing on an almost limitless shore, we can see, coming slowly in, the great rolling waves which go to make the inevitable high tide of women's progress, kept back often by seemingly impossible rocks and creeks, but still coming on. And no one can keep it back [2; p. 88].*

## Glossary

**choreography:** is (formally) the art (especially in dance) of designing a sequence of movements of specified form - here it describes creative election displays by the NUWSS.

**Enfranchisement:** giving the right to vote to a particular group.

**Fabian Society:** an organisation founded in 1884 to promote socialist principles and policies through gradual reform rather than revolution.

**London School of Medicine for Women:** founded by a group of women in 1874, when women were not admitted for medical degree programmes - after 1877 its students were allowed to complete their clinical studies at the Royal Free Hospital.

**National Union of Women Workers:** Founded in 1895, its objectives were: 'The encouragement of sympathy of thought and purpose among the women of Great Britain and Ireland; the promotion of their social, civil and religious welfare; the gathering and distribution of serviceable information; the federation of women's organisations and the formation of local councils and Union of Workers.

**Private Members' Bills:** Parliamentary Bills (proposals) introduced by an individual MP, rather than by the government.

**The Lancet:** a highly respected medical journal, founded in 1823 and still one of the world's leading general medical research journals

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# Winifred Holtby: action for world peace, women's rights and racial harmony

Marion Shaw

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## The Holtby family

Winifred Holtby was born on 23 June 1898, in Rudston, near Bridlington. She was the younger daughter of David Holtby and his wife Alice Holtby, nee Winn. David owned a prosperous farm at Rudston and came from a family who successfully farmed across an area that stretched from upstream Humber to Bridlington. Alice also came from a farming family; her father rented a mill and farm near Wensleydale. She was a large, vigorous, golf-playing, outspoken and opinionated woman, with youthful energy and enthusiasms even into old age. From quite a humble background she became a woman of importance when, four years after the family had given up farming and moved to Cottingham, she was elected in 1923 to East Riding County Council and in 1934 became the first woman to serve as an alderman. She was an ambitious and powerful mother who encouraged Winifred's writing talents and supported her university career (1917-1921) at Somerville College, Oxford, reading Modern History.



Fig 7.1  
Rudston House: Winifred's birthplace

## A lifelong friendship

Winifred was first educated by a governess and then at Queen Margaret's School, a girls' boarding school in Scarborough. Her university career at Somerville College was interrupted by a year's service in 1918 as a member of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) during the First World War. When she returned to Somerville College she met Vera Brittain, also returned from the war, where she had nursed in the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD). Vera became famous for *Testament of Youth* (1933), her account of her VAD experiences and the deaths of her fiancé, her brother and two close friends, soldiers killed during the war. As a result of these major losses she became a lifelong pacifist. Winifred and Vera became friends, a friendship that lasted throughout Winifred's life.

Winifred's generation of women received the vote on partial terms of equality with men in 1918. This, and the fact that so many of her male peers had been killed in the war, gave her and other women like her a sense of responsibility towards society. They considered themselves as women citizens. Winifred took her responsibilities seriously, becoming involved with Vera in pacifist and feminist activities. After they graduated, she and Vera moved to live together in London to lecture on these causes and also to pursue their ideals of becoming writers. As well as journalism they both wrote novels. Winifred is chiefly remembered today for her novel *South Riding* (1936), set in the triangular area from Hull to Spurn Point and up the coast to Bridlington. It has never been out of print since its first publication and has been dramatised twice on television and once in film. She wrote five other novels, a large number of short stories, two volumes

of poems, several non-fiction works and numerous articles for a range of journals from the *Radio Times* to *The Manchester Guardian*.



Fig 7.2  
Winifred Holtby, probably in the garden  
of Holtby House, Cottingham

## The League of Nations Union

When they graduated from Somerville College both Vera and Winifred joined the League of Nations Union, formed in 1918 in the United Kingdom. This was one of many societies that were anxious to support some sort of international authority which would settle international disputes and help to prevent war. The international authority was the League of Nations (note the difference in name), an organisation of many countries, formed in 1919 at the Paris Peace Conference. The chief aims—the covenant—of the League, were to settle international disputes by arbitration, reduce armaments and to maintain world peace. The idea of its founders was also to end the practice of secret agreements and power struggles between countries, which seemed to have led to the First World War. Instead, there should be open diplomacy,

negotiations among countries. The League was a focus of hope in the 1920s but the exclusion of Germany from membership and the unwillingness of America to sign up to the aims of the League made it difficult for the League to succeed.

The League of Nations Union promoted the aims of the League of Nations and worked on its behalf. Vera and Winifred began lecturing throughout the country on behalf of the League of Nations Union. Millions of Britons joined the League of Nations Union until it ended in the 1930s. It relied on subscriptions and donations and mostly used unpaid speakers.

## Speaking out for world peace

Winifred was one of these enthusiastic speakers. She believed that ‘a co-operative institution like the League of Nations, although imperfect, is better than armed neutralities or balances of power’ in which countries not actually at war rivalled each other in the amount of weapons they possessed. She supported the principle of democratic accountability in which the population of a country would know what its government was doing and would hold it to account. In order for this to be effective, ordinary citizens needed to be educated in what this might mean, particularly the idea of international co-operation. As a historian she believed that nations and empires had been necessary for the development of civilisation but were now outdated, aggressive and dangerous. She wrote:

*What we want now is the transition to a still wider sphere of international co-operation, where empires don't matter and patriotism becomes parochial and the service of mankind becomes the only consideration.*

Winifred's idealism and a sense of

responsibility as a citizen now that women were getting the vote led her, often up to four times a week, to undertake *'long hot journeys in trains or long cold journeys in trams'* to make speeches or lead discussions about the League *'in almost every London suburb and in numerous small towns and villages all over the South of England and the Midlands.'* The work was often disheartening. At outdoor meetings she was frequently moved on by the police, she was heckled and she sometimes had to raise her own crowd. She learned how obstinate public opinion could be and how prejudiced. Speaking to a group of upper-class women, she found that their racist and imperialistic views were *'a pitiable example of erstwhile ruling classes'*, very different from the schoolchildren, town councillors, trade unionists and the unemployed she had addressed the day before.

## A reluctant feminist

Alongside this, Winifred was also writing and lecturing on feminist issues, even though, as she said herself, she was a reluctant feminist, impatient that the battle for equal rights still needed to be won.

*I dislike everything that feminism implies... I want to be about the work in which my real interests lie, the study of inter-race relationships, the writing of novels and so forth. But while inequality exists, while injustice is done and opportunity denied to the great majority of women, I shall have to be a feminist.*

Her commitment to feminism took its most notable form in her membership of the Six Point Group, an organisation which aimed to improve the lives of women by constitutional means. She wrote many articles for its publication *Time and Tide* and eventually became a director of the journal. The Group's name came from

the six points of change it championed: satisfactory laws on child assault, widowed mothers, unmarried mothers, the guardianship of children, equal pay for men and women teachers and equal pay for male and female civil servants. When one campaign was won another took its place.



Fig 7.3

With George Bernard Shaw and Margaret Rhondda at the Malvern Festival, July 1935

## Women and peace

During these early years of lecturing she tried to link feminism and anti-militarism. *'Women do not make war... They know too well the value of human life, the cost at which it is brought into the world... But it is not enough for women to refrain from making war; they must make peace.'* Also, she believed that the rise of fascism in the 1930s would threaten women's rights and freedoms. She wrote many articles on this topic and a play *Take Back Your Freedom*. In an article of 1934, *'Shall I Order a Black Blouse?'* she wrote that *'At present I feel and think as an individual; if the Blackshirts were victorious I should be expected to think only as a woman.'* Winifred thought that the Blackshirt motto *'We want men who are men and women who are women'* meant a belief *'which when practised has resulted in an attempt at sex segregation.'*

Winifred's writing on all subjects showed what she called *'a human ideal'*, in which people are seen as individuals, and not

categorised according to race, religion or gender: *'Neither Jew nor Gentile [non-Jew], male or female, bond or free.'* She wrote to her mother towards the end of her life that her aim throughout had been to see an end to inequalities of all kind, to persuade people to *'recognise the human claims of Negroes and Jews and women and all oppressed and humiliated creatures.'* This commitment involved her in the cause that in some respects was the most important of her life. It began when she was a child, with her interest in South Africa.

## Going to South Africa

When Vera Brittain married in 1926 it seemed to Winifred that this was an opportunity for her to fulfil a lifelong dream of visiting South Africa and, in particular, to visit Jean McWilliam, the friend she had met when working in France during the war. Jean had moved to South Africa and become the headmistress of a girls' school in Pretoria. Winifred also met the South African novelist Ethelreda Lewis, who recognised in her a passion for social justice which could be useful in helping to put right some of the injustices that black people suffered in South Africa. Mrs Lewis, and other white liberals like her, who wished to promote better conditions for black workers, feared that unless these injustices were dealt with, there would be violent racial conflict during which the black population would turn to Communism. These two dangers, she believed, could be avoided by the growth of a black trade union movement based on a British model. This was where Winifred might be helpful.

The mid-1920s were crucial years for South African race relations. Black unrest was increasing as a result of recent legislation which gave more power to white workers at the expense of black workers. An increase in segregationist policies, which we now would call apartheid, was driving black workers further into poverty and degradation. The Industrial

Consolidation Act of 1924 had stated that the term 'employee' could not be applied to black workers. This meant that they were deprived of many benefits, including trade union membership. The Mines and Works Acts of 1926 specifically excluded Africans and Coloureds from obtaining certificates of competency. This exclusion meant that they could hold only low-paid, unskilled work. It was generally acknowledged that white wages (the highest in the world) could only be paid for by the sweated labour of black workers. This was a situation which the South African Trade Union movement and the South African Labour Party supported.

## A trade union for black workers

Mrs Lewis believed that an existing 'informal' union, formed from workers who had been involved the year before in a dock strike, had great potential as a force for change. This was the black Industrial and Commercial workers' Union (ICU), and its leader Clement Kadalie. The son of a Nyasaland (now Malawi) chief, he was a man of great charm, energy, recruiting ability and an impassioned speaker. He was also, as Winifred would later describe him, *'suspicious, sensitive, vain'* and also easily influenced.

Under Kadalie's leadership, the ICU during its first five years was astonishingly successful. More than a trade union in the British sense, it was a social, political, religious and educational force which served to unite black people from different kinds of employment and different areas, both rural and urban. Its membership was 80,000 by 1927 and its annual income £12,000. But as its size increased its weaknesses became apparent: poor financial and administrative management, hostility from the government and employers, divided loyalties amongst its officials, inexperience in trade union organisation and lack of

support from similar organisations which did not acknowledge its existence. Mrs Lewis and other white liberals were keen to remove these weaknesses and Winifred seemed an appropriate person to help by gaining support from the British trade union movement.



Fig 7.4

Clements Kadalie, leader of the ICU, South Africa

On her return from South Africa, Winifred's first task was to provide books for the ICU libraries in Durban and Johannesburg. Many black workers had moved into the cities and had lost touch with their cultural roots. The ICU was aiming to educate them in new ideas and ways of life for which up-to-date books were needed. Kadalie acknowledged the receipt of many parcels of books in a letter which also asked Winifred to make contact with British politicians and labour leaders. After making enquiries, Winifred finally made contact with Arthur Creech Jones, General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union. Kadalie himself wrote to Creech Jones urging action; it was time, Kadalie said, that *'the British Labour Movement should interest itself in the position of South African Native workers.'*

## Appealing for help in Britain

Creech Jones advised Kadalie to be cautious in his management of the ICU, not to inflame racial hatred but to concentrate on *'the capacity of the Union to cater for the industrial needs of the natives.'* Kadalie seems to have taken this advice seriously in that he created a 'constitution', which Winifred appears to have been involved in drafting; it stated, amongst much else, that the union *'shall not foster or encourage antagonism towards other established bodies, political or otherwise, of African peoples, or of organised workers.'* He also decided to visit England to advance the cause of the ICU, arriving at Southampton in May 1927. He noted with delight that the dockers at Southampton were white, that a white porter carried his luggage, that the train to London was not segregated and, most of all, that a *'tall young Englishwoman'* (Winifred) had greeted him in London, shaken hands and driven off with him in a taxi, much to the surprise of the white South Africans who had shunned him on the boat.

Winifred helped to arrange a lecture tour for him throughout England and Scotland so that he could publicise the ICU. The tour was flattering and encouraging but little in the way of actual support was forthcoming, including financial support. There was a general fear amongst British trade unions and left-wing political parties that support for the ICU could antagonise the South African trade union movement. But Kadalie's visit to London increased Winifred's support for him and the ICU. She believed that the development of a black trade union was the way forward so that, eventually, association with white trade unionism would be possible. *'I'm sure'*, she wrote, *'that Kadalie is going on the right lines when he works for this. The gulf between black and white labour must ultimately be fatal for South Africa.'* What seemed to her to be the ICU's most urgent need was effective organisation,

and the idea took hold that an experienced trade union organiser from England should visit South Africa to help the ICU with its administration.

After some months of searching for such a person, she was approached by William George Ballinger, from Motherwell. He was an idealistic and hardworking local government activist but with little trade union experience. He was keen to take on the task but by the time he reached South Africa in June 1928 the situation with the ICU was almost beyond remedy. The ICU was rapidly descending into chaos, with branches splitting off from it, no funds, dishonest lawyers, and personal feuds and rival organisations springing up everywhere. Where other men would have hastened home, Ballinger persevered, eventually, after the failure of the ICU, working to promote co-operative businesses in farming, catering and retail. His salary was rarely paid by the ICU during the years he worked for it, but by Winifred, who did so with help from friends and fund-raising activities and publicity. This fund-raising also included income from her impassioned journalism on issues such as segregation, racist legislation, the plight of black people in Britain and, of course, the Ballinger cause. *'I must have written literally millions of words about Ballinger since 1927,'* she wrote to Vera in 1934.



Fig 7.5  
The Winifred Holtby Memorial Library,  
in Soweto, South Africa  
(it was moved there in 1963,  
and destroyed in the 1976 riots)

## A lost cause

By 1930 the ICU was a lost cause. Kadalie had resigned in disgrace in 1929, a tragic lost opportunity to harness and direct the power of the ICU in its early stages. Kadalie may have been distracted from his leadership of the ICU by European (and white liberal) interference but the task was almost certainly too great for him, probably for any individual at that time. As for Winifred, she never gave up hope in the ICU cause, at least not in her public pronouncements. It is easy to accuse her of inexperience in her involvement in South African affairs. She seriously underestimated the importance of racial issues to the development of trade unionism, believing, as she frequently stated, that there were similarities between black workers and working-class labour in Britain. She also underestimated the power and toughness of the white ruling class in South Africa, including its presence in the trade union movement. However, her efforts marked an early stage in the long struggle for racial equality, which would dominate South Africa for decades. Her unwillingness to abandon the ICU, in spite of its disappointments, is reflected in the main female character in her novel *Mandoa! Mandoa!*, a representation of Winifred herself, who, facing very difficult problems, expresses her determined refusal to accept *'We by failure have to work for the world as we know it as best we can... we have to go on.'*

## Active to the end



Fig 7.6

Winifred's grave, in the churchyard  
of All Saints Church, Rudston

By the time *Mandoa, Mandoa!* was published in 1933 Winifred was seriously ill. Severe headaches and nausea were first attributed to overwork, but in 1932 kidney disease (Bright's disease) had been diagnosed. She was told that she probably had only two years to live. She kept this information from others until her condition worsened to such an extent that friends and relatives had to be told. She filled her remaining years with an astonishing amount of work and service to others, including the writing of *South Riding*. She died, aged thirty-seven, on 29 September 1935, in a London nursing home. After a London memorial service at she was taken for burial in All Saints Churchyard, Rudston, where her gravestone gives the dates of her life, that she was the daughter of David and Alice Holtby and the inscription 'God give me work till my life shall end And life till my work is done.' Although the inscription is appropriate it insufficiently informs those who visit the grave of her great achievements as a social reformer and writer.

## Glossary

**Alderman:** an important member of a town council in Britain (especially in the past).

**Coloureds:** In 1920s South Africa this term referred to people of mixed race, as opposed to black Africans, Indians or whites.

**fascism:** an authoritarian and nationalistic right-wing system of government and social organisation, which found expression in the 1930s, especially in Germany under Hitler, Italy under Mussolini and Spain under Franco. The British Fascists, led by Oswald Mosley, were known as the Blackshirts.

**imperialism:** an unequal relationship, usually in the form of an empire, whereby one country invades (or acquires by other means) and rules others, largely for its own economic benefit, and keeps control by force, justifying its rule with claims of racial, cultural or technological superiority.

**Paris Peace Conference:** the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 followed the end of the First World War, the victors setting out the terms for peace in the Treaty of Versailles. It led to the formation of the League of Nations.

**segregationism:** the practice of separating races in their daily life, in the workplace, schools, restaurants and transport; often, as in Apartheid South Africa or in the southern US, linked to claims of racial superiority.

**South African Labour Party:** founded in 1910 to support white workers, it had no black members; the party split in 1928 over recognition of the ICU, and its influence soon declined.

**white liberals:** a term used in South Africa to describe (usually affluent) whites who disagreed with segregationism and repressive racial policies, which many of them feared would lead to violent revolution.

## Further Reading

1. Vera Brittain, *Testament of Friendship*, Virago [1940], 1980

2. Winifred Holtby, *Letters to a Friend*, edited by Alice Holtby and Jean McWilliam, Collins, 1937

3. Winifred Holtby, *Mandoa, Mandoa!* Virago [1933], 1980

4. Marion Shaw, *The Clear Stream: A Biography of Winifred Holtby*, Virago, 2000

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# Lillian Bilocca and Hull's fighting fishwives

*Hands that rocked the cradle...and actions that shook the world*

**Brian W Lavery**

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## An ordinary housewife

Mrs Lillian Bilocca, also known as *Big Lil* (1929-1988), was the leader of a high-profile campaign by Hull trawlermen's wives to improve working and safety conditions for that industry in the late 1960s. She was born in a 'two-up, two-down' at Villa Terrace, Wassand Street, Hull, East Yorkshire, in the city's Hessele Road fishing community, on 26 May 1929, as the eldest of four daughters of Ernest and Harriet Marshall. Ernest had been a Royal Navy engineer and then later a trawlerman. Harriet was a housewife.

Lillian's education at Daltry Street Junior School ended at the age of just fourteen and she joined a local fish house as a cod skinner. Like her peers, she went from being a seafarer's daughter to a seafarer's wife and later a seafarer's mother.

She had two children, Ernest (b. 1946) and Virginia (b. 1950), with Carmelo 'Charlie' Bilocca (b.1902), who was a Maltese merchant sailor with the Hull-based *Ellerman-Wilson Line*. He settled in the city and later worked as a trawlerman. Lillian, Charlie and the children lived in Coltman Street, Hull, off Hessele Road.

After Charlie's death in 1981 at the age of seventy-nine, Lillian moved to the nearby Thornton Estate, where she ended her days, a stone's throw from her birthplace; and that would have been her life—told in the *hatch, match and dispatch* columns of the local paper, like others of her class and time—had it not been for remarkable events in 1968.



Fig 8.1  
Civic plaque on the flats on the site of the old Victoria Hall



Fig 8.2  
Portrait photo of Mrs Bilocca

(both pictures courtesy of Dr Alec Gill MBE)

## Tragedy at sea

Aged thirty-nine, Lillian became a household name as the impromptu leader of a 'fishwives' army' fighting for better safety at sea following the Hull Triple Trawler Disaster during the 'Dark Winter' of 1968. The *St Romanus*, *Kingston Peridot* and *Ross Cleveland* sank, with the loss of fifty-eight men between January 11 and February 4, in ferocious Arctic waters. This was the biggest peacetime UK fishing disaster of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Lillian and the Hessle Road Women's Committee went from lobbying trawler bosses to being invited to Westminster and fighting their case in the glare of the world's media, forcing huge changes in trawler safety in an incredibly short time, saving countless future lives.

The *St Romanus* sank with all hands on January 11, 1968, as did the *Kingston Peridot* on January 26, and on February 4 only one man (the mate Harry Eddom) survived the sinking of the *Ross Cleveland*.

Fig 8.3



Front cover of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary souvenir paper for the Triple Trawler Disaster, showing the three doomed ships. (Reproduced by kind permission of the Hull Daily Mail).

## A dangerous occupation

Into the late 1960s, trawlermen worked in the most dangerous industry on Earth. The Standard Mortality Rate (SMR) for UK fishermen was seventeen times that of other workers and more than five times that of the next most dangerous job – coal mining. [4; p. 11]. These harsh conditions contributed to catastrophic loss of lives in early 1968.

The *St Romanus* had no radio operator. There were no lifelines or adequate safety rails. Moreover, any protective or safety clothing was to be bought by the men. Crews provided their own bedding, bought from a 'company store'.

Trawl fishing was still governed by the final 'master and servant' Act in force in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – The Merchant Shipping Act of 1894. A man could be jailed for not showing up for work.

## Taking action

The 1968 disaster led to the trawlermen's wives of Hessle Road taking direct action. After the *St Romanus* and the *Kingston Peridot* had been declared lost and before the fate of the *Ross Cleveland* was known, Lillian and others gathered thousands of signatures demanding better safety. She and her fellow 'fishwives' organised a meeting at a local community hall on Friday, February 2, 1968.

An estimated 600 women attended, and among those speaking was local National Union of Seamen firebrand John Prescott. He went on to become the Member of Parliament for East Hull from 1970 and Deputy Prime Minister from 1997-2010. He was made a Labour peer in 2011.

Local Labour MP James Johnson was also at the meeting, along with Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) officials as well as left-wing activists from Hull

University. But these angry working-class women were in no mood for politicians and union men and middle-class Marxist lecturers.

Lillian, in her fish worker's headscarf and apron, addressed the women: *'Right lasses, we're here to talk about what we are going to do after the losses of these trawlers. I don't want any of you effin' and blindin'. The press and TV are here.'*

In the highly charged atmosphere the women marched on the owners' offices, but the 'headscarf army' were fobbed off. Lillian told the crowd: *'There is only one way to make these people meet us and hear our case and that's by taking action.'*



Fig 8.4

'Marching on the bosses': Taken after the Victoria Hall meeting and shows Mrs. Bilocca leading a march on the owners' offices.

(Reproduced by kind permission of the Hull Daily Mail)

Just a little more than ten hours later, in the early morning of Saturday, February 3, she and a small group of women tried to stop the *St Keverne* leaving dock. Under the erroneous impression that no radio controller was on the trawler, Lillian attempted to board it. Photographs of the seventeen-stone housewife struggling with police, who prevented her boarding, hit the headlines. A Sunday tabloid dubbed her 'Big Lil' and a media star was born. She was to be lionised and patronised in equal measure by the Press, a cross between Boudicca and Nora Batty.

Some women were angered by Lillian's action. Superstitions were strong, and

many felt that a woman on the dock was bad luck and would 'wave the men away' to their doom. Superstition was embedded in this community and even in comparatively modern times it was enough to prevent almost half of 600 or so joining in the dockside march after the meeting. Perhaps the constant proximity to death and the expectation of tragedy caused this to be so [2; p. 15].

This reaction may seem odd when viewed from outside this close community, but the feeling was strong enough to be partly used against Lillian later to drop her from the Women's Committee.

The tide turned quickly in the women's favour when a third ship sank. On Sunday, February 4, 1968, Skipper Philip Gay of the ill-fated *Ross Cleveland* transmitted this final, desperate message to his friend Skipper Len Whur of the *Kingston Andalusite*, who watched helplessly as the *Cleveland* sank: *'I am going over. We are laying over. Help us, Len, she's going. Give my love and the crew's love to the wives and families.'* Skipper Whur saw the *Ross Cleveland* sink during a blizzard and hurricane in an Icelandic fjord, but was powerless to help.

Lillian's son Ernie Bilocca, aged twenty-one, was a deckhand under Skipper Whur.

## The Fishermen's Charter

Trawler owners, who had recently snubbed the women, now asked to see them to discuss their demands. The women drew up a *Fishermen's Charter* demanding:

**Full crews, including radio operators for all ships**

**Twelve-hourly contacts between ships and owners while trawlers were at sea**

**Improved safety equipment from the owners**

## A 'mother ship' with medical facilities for all fleets

## Better training for crews and a safety representative on each ship

## Suspension of fishing in winter on the northern Icelandic coast that claimed the three trawlers

and

## A Royal Commission into the industry.

When news of the sinking of the *Ross Cleveland*—apparently lost with all hands—reached Hull, Lillian and two others waited to meet with the owners and saw one of their colleagues, co-organiser Christine Smallbones, being comforted by a clergyman. He confirmed to her that the *Ross Cleveland*, skippered by her brother Philip Gay, was lost.

A photograph of this moment was on the front of the *Daily Mirror* the next day.



Fig 8.5

Daily Mirror, front page from February 6, 1968, provided by ukpressonline.co.uk

The women took their case to Westminster. Grief-stricken Christine stayed in Hull. The local TGWU arranged the meeting, and the women met with Minister of Agriculture Fred Peart and the Minister of State at the Board of Trade J. P. W. Mallalieu.

Not since the Russian Navy's sinking of the Hull fishing fleet in 1904, when commanders of that country's Imperial Navy mistook trawlers for Japanese torpedo boats, had such shockwaves run through that community as when the news of the *Ross Cleveland's* fate became known.

## Going to London

Lillian Bilocca, Yvonne Blenkinsop and Mary Denness set off for London with ten thousand signatures, their *Fishermen's Charter* and a media circus in tow. Lillian had earlier told the Press she would march on Downing Street or even 'that *Harold Wilson's private house*,' if she was not heard. Peart and Mallalieu were told by Prime Minister Harold Wilson that the women were to be helped as much as possible.

As they set off for London, the *Hull Daily Mail* reported:

*The wives, led by 39-year-old Lillian Bilocca, were laughed off at first by many in the fishing industry. But now it is accepted that they mean business. What could have turned out to be a hysterical, disorganised protest is now becoming regarded as something of a fighting machine, backed by hundreds.*

Mrs Mary Denness recalled how, at King's Cross, the platforms were empty and that she, Lillian and Yvonne were the only 'real' passengers on the train: 'It was full of journalists, union men, photographers and TV folk. When we got off, the station was empty and the platforms were surrounded by those barriers they use on royal visits.' But when they got to the exit there were thousands waiting and cheering. A newspaper billboard read: 'BIG LIL HITS TOWN.'

The women had a meeting with the ministers, after which they learned that the mate of the *Ross Cleveland*, Harry Eddom, had been found alive. The story of his survival and how the two crewmates he shared a lifeboat with, bosun Walter Hewitt and galley boy John Barry Rogers, had perished, became worldwide news.

The eyes of the world were on the Hull fishing community—and the politicians and owners knew it.

The women were delighted at the news of Eddom's survival and the immediate promises from the MPs. Upon their return, Lillian later told the Press at Hull Paragon Station it was the '*happiest day of her life.*' '*We've done it!*' she said.

## Government reaction

The action taken was very swift. Fishing off the Northern Cape of Iceland was suspended immediately until the weather improved. Over the coming weeks the Government forced owners to launch an interim 'control ship', the *Ross Valiant*. Plans were drawn up for a new full-time 'mother ship' to replace the interim one. The Met. Office also placed a weather report ship in the fishing grounds. The Hull Fishing Vessels Owners' Association announced that a training ship would be set up. But the idea of having a 'shop steward' on each trawler was rejected as it might 'undermine the skipper's authority.' There were recommendations of wholesale reforms, stopping short of the 'de-casualisation' of the industry.

And in October 1968 a public inquiry was held in Hull, which resulted in the *Holland-Martin Report into Trawler Safety*. The Report was damning, saying that protective clothing could have saved the two men who perished in Eddom's lifeboat. A rubber 'duck' suit worn by Eddom, which helped save his life, was bought by him from a company store for seven guineas (£7.35).

The other two had had no such clothing.

The Report also contained eighty-three safety recommendations and a demand that life rafts be equipped forthwith with safety gear. Inquiry chairman Admiral Sir Deric Holland-Martin added that the industry must '*change human attitudes at every level.*' All the demands of the *Fishermen's Charter* were enacted, most before the Inquiry, the remainder soon after.

The 'headscarf protestors' achieved in days what unions and politicians had spent decades demanding, without success. Their campaign captured the public imagination and shamed the industry and the government into immediate action.

## Local opposition

In weeks to come some sections of the community Lillian had fought so hard to help turned on her. While Hull trawlers were subject to the bad weather ban, Icelandic trawlers continued to land fish in Hull. This even led to poison-pen letters being sent to her and her co-fighters.

After Lillian's London triumph, a TV appearance on the Eamonn Andrews Show saw her star fall with stark rapidity. During banter with the show's host, Lil was asked what fishermen did when not at sea. She quipped in her broad 'essle road accent: '*The married ones come home and take out their wives, then go to the pubs. The single 'uns go wi' their tarts.*'

'*There was an audible gasp,*' recalled Mary Denness. '*In Hessle Road the word "tart" has a totally different meaning. It simply means girlfriend and is not offensive and does not have the same connotations it has elsewhere, i.e. being a prostitute.*'

Hostile letters also appeared in the local press. Skipper Len Whur, (the 'Len' appealed to in the final radio broadcast

from the *Ross Cleveland*) was among her fiercest critics, accusing her of putting jobs at risk and *'interfering in something she knew nowt about.'*

## 'A dangerous nuisance'

Moreover, fewer than twenty days after her Westminster trip, Lillian lost her job. While visiting students at the University of Strathclyde as a guest speaker, a letter was delivered to her home from her employers, Wilkinson Bros. (Fish Processors) of Wassand Street, Hull. In a rather haughty tone they noted she had *'not been at work for three weeks'* and therefore *'assumed she was not coming back'*—the bosses added that a week's pay was awaiting her, should she wish to pick it up.



Fig 8.6

Glasgow Evening Times cutting kindly provided by the National Library of Scotland archive.

Mrs Bilocca never worked in fisheries again. The bosses thought her a dangerous nuisance and some of her peers thought she was 'showing up' the community. It was to be two years until she found a job. Her final job was working in the cloakroom of a Hull nightclub. In 1988, she died of cancer, aged fifty-nine. Her obituary was in *The Times*. At her funeral only a handful of those who had once cheered her no-nonsense, bluff oratory were at the graveside. She was buried alongside her beloved Charlie at Hull's Northern Cemetery, in the city's Chanterlands Avenue area.

## Aftermath

In 1990, the local council placed a plaque on the site of the old Victoria Hall. It reads:

*In recognition of the contributions to the fishing industry by the women of Hessle Road, led by Lillian Bilocca, who successfully campaigned for better safety measures following the loss of three Hull trawlers in 1968.*

The 'Cod Wars' led to the de-commissioning of the Hull trawler fleet, and the city's fishing industry was all but gone by 1976. Owners were compensated handsomely, while the men, deemed to be casual workers, got nothing. It was only in 2001 after a long campaign – fronted by the Hull West and Hessle MP Alan Johnson – that the then Labour Government paid compensation to the surviving trawlermen and families of those who had died in the interim.

It is widely accepted that the direct actions of the Hessle Road Women's Committee and the courage of its leader Mrs. Lillian Bilocca saved countless lives to come and transformed forever one of the harshest, most dangerous industries on the planet.

## Glossary

**Boudicca:** (also Boadicea) Queen of the Ireni, an ancient Celtic tribe, who led a revolt against the occupying Roman army in Britain around 60 AD.

**Cod Wars:** The Cod Wars – sometimes called the Icelandic Cod Wars – were a series of disputes over fishing territories between UK and Icelandic trawlers. The first in 1958 saw the Icelanders increase their fishing territorial limit from 4 to 12 miles, in 1972 this became 50 miles and by 1975 the Icelanders had set up a 200-mile limit. Across the years there were many skirmishes between both sides but Iceland eventually achieved its aims at the expense of ports like Hull and Grimsby. For an excellent detailed account, see [6].

**de-casualisation:** replacement of ‘casual’ workers, often hired on a daily basis, by more a permanent, contracted workforce. (While the TGWU represented trawlermen, it was difficult to improve working conditions at sea.)

**hatch, match and dispatch columns:** birth, marriage and death notices in local papers

**Master and Servant Acts:** 18th and 19th century Acts of Parliament regulating employment, heavily biased towards the interests of employers

**Royal Commission:** a major public inquiry into a specific issue, ordered by the government of the day on behalf of the monarch

**Standard Mortality Rate:** often expressed as a ratio rather than a rate, this measures the rate of accidental death in the workforce, compared to averages over all industries

**Sources** – From the PhD research of Brian Lavery BA (Hons. – 1<sup>st</sup> class), Dept. of English, University of Hull from his thesis ‘Lillian Bilocca – The Head-Scarfed Revolutionary’.

Interviews with and acknowledgements to: Mr. Ernie Bilocca, (Lillian Bilocca’s son), Mr Stuart Russell, (assistant news editor, the Hull Daily Mail, 1968-70), Lord John Prescott, (former ship’s steward and union worker, later Labour politician and peer), Dr. Alec Gill, MBE, local historian and author, Mrs. Mary Denness, (trawler safety campaigner 1968), Mrs. Theresa Wade, (widow of Skipper Philip Gay of the Ross Cleveland).

**Archives:** The Hull Daily Mail archive housed at Hull History Centre, and also the University of Hull’s Department of Maritime History archives and reference library.

**Likenesses:** Photo of Mrs. Lillian Bilocca (circa 1968), Commemorative plaque to Mrs. Bilocca et al, courtesy of Dr Alec Gill MBE.

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## Contributors

**Patrick Doyle** is a Durham graduate and former lecturer in History at Endsleigh College, which later merged into Humberside College of Higher Education. He served as a Hull City Councillor 1972-2002, and was Council Leader for 22 years. He is a papal Knight of St Gregory and was Provincial President of the Lay Dominicans 2007-2013.

**Marie Holmes** was born and raised in Hull and has worked in a variety of departments in local government, including public libraries and higher education institutions, since leaving college. She has an interest in local history and returned to education in 2003 as a very mature student, with part-time study at the University of Hull on the BA Regional and Local History programme. Graduating with an upper second-class degree in 2009, she has continued part-time study and obtained her MA in Regional and Local History and Archaeology in 2013. Currently in her first year of study, again part-time, for the PhD in History, she has a particular interest in women's history in the early 20th century. Her PhD thesis will focus on Suffrage Societies in the East Yorkshire Region.

**Ekkehard Kopp** is Emeritus Professor of Mathematics at Hull University, where he taught from 1970 to 2007. He has authored ten books, principally on probability theory and mathematical finance, and has served on various academic editorial boards, currently editing a series of mathematical texts for Cambridge University Press. He is Treasurer of the Hull Amnesty Group.

**Brian Lavery's** ongoing PhD at Hull University is in creative non-fiction, based on the Triple Trawler Disaster of 1968 and the fishwives' revolt that followed. Brian was a print and broadcast journalist for more than 25 years before returning to higher education. He is also a

poet and writer of fiction. He is Mrs Lillian Bilocca's biographer and wrote the entry on her life for last year's Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. Brian also runs a community media project in east Hull. His book, *The Headscarfed Revolutionaries—Lillian Bilocca and the Hull Triple Trawler Disaster*, is due to be published by Barbican Press ([www.barbicanpress.com](http://www.barbicanpress.com)) in Autumn 2014.

**Kathleen Lennon** is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Hull, and one of her specialist interests is Gender Theory. She was a founder member of the UK Society for Women and Philosophy, Hull Trades Council's Women's Committee, Hull Women's Centre and the Hull Centre for Gender Studies. She has written books and articles on, amongst other things, Self and Embodiment, Gender Theory, and the Imagination.

**Cecile Oxaal** is a retired secondary school teacher of English and taught in Hull for over thirty years. She is a graduate of the former University College of the West Indies (University of London), now the University of the West Indies. In 2003 she was awarded the MBE, 'for services to education in Hull'. She is the current Chair of Hull Amnesty Group.

**Robb Robinson** was born in Hull and is from a family engaged for generations in the business of seafaring and fishing. Based at the Maritime Historical Studies Centre, University of Hull, his numerous publications and research interests cover the fields of coastal history, fisheries and whaling, in addition to the history of Hull and the Yorkshire coast. His books include *Far Horizons: from Hull to the Ends of the Earth* (Hull, 2010). A Trustee of the British Commission for Maritime History, Robb worked with colleagues from various countries on the production of a two-volume *History of the North Atlantic Fisheries*. He has also contributed

to numerous national and regional TV and radio programmes and did the background research for, and contributed to, the *Kick Murphy Letters* programme, broadcast on Radio Humberside, which gained the national silver award in the Best Programme category at the BBC Frank Gillard Local Radio Awards in 2013. He is strongly committed to raising awareness of Hull and the East Riding's long and in many ways unique involvement with both British and world history and to using the related history and many associated success stories as a means of widening horizons.

**Marion Shaw** was born in Hull, brought up in the North Riding and then returned to Hull where her mother became headmistress of a junior school in the Hessle Road area. Educated at Kingston High School and then at Hull University, where for most of her academic life she was a member of the English Department. In 1993 she was appointed Professor and Head of the Department of English and Drama at Loughborough University. She retired from full-time employment in 1999, continuing on part-time contracts until 2009. Her research interests are in nineteenth-century literature and women's writing, particularly that of the interwar period. In 1972 she and two colleagues introduced the first university women's studies programme in English, and later she became the first editor of the *Journal of Gender Studies*.