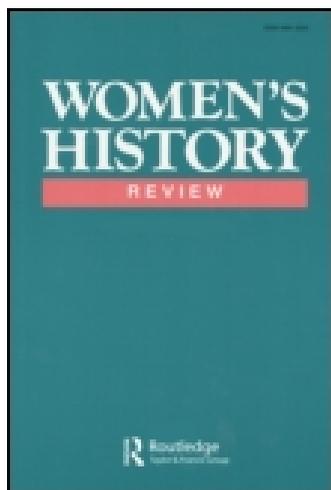


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Political Life in the Shadows: the post suffrage political career of S. Margery Fry (1874–1958)

Anne Logan

Drawing upon research on the working life of the penal reformer and educationalist S. Margery Fry (1874–1958) and her role as a policy-maker, this article argues that there were alternative ways in which women could participate in post-suffrage political culture, other than through elected office or party politics. The article positions Margery Fry both as a feminist and a public intellectual and argues that the First World War and the granting of women's suffrage allowed a step change to take place in Fry's career, taking her from a regional political stage to a national and international one. It also contends that she was able to wield considerable power 'in the shadows' as a policy advisor.

Margery Fry is best-remembered for her work for penal reform in the period 1920–1958 at the forefront of the campaigns of the Howard League. Her national and international contribution in this sphere, both as a pressure-group activist and as a government advisor, is acknowledged by criminologists.¹ However, she had a great many other interests, moving between the parallel worlds of voluntary action and academia throughout her life, and achieving the status of a public intellectual through appearances on the *Brain's Trust*, a popular BBC panel discussion programme in the 1940s and '50s. She was connected to many important social

Anne Logan is Senior Lecturer in the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research at the University of Kent. She is the author of several publications including the monograph *Feminism and Criminal Justice: a historical perspective* (Palgrave, 2008). She is currently working on a biographical study of the twentieth-century penal reformer and educationalist, S. Margery Fry (1874–1958). Correspondence to: Dr Anne Logan, University of Kent, Chatham Maritime, Kent ME4 4AG, UK. Email: a.f.logan@kent.ac.uk

and policy networks in early twentieth century Britain, including Quaker religious hierarchies and philanthropy through her sisters, Joan and Ruth; the art world and the Bloomsbury Group through her brother, Roger; the women's movement through her friend, Eleanor Rathbone; and the academic world, as a result of her time spent at Somerville College, Oxford, and Birmingham University. Although she never stood for office, she was deeply involved in politics, was an outstanding humanitarian and was frequently consulted by civil servants on a wide range of policy issues. Her appetite for committee work was prodigious: she spent thirty years on the University Grant Committee and was on government advisory committees for both colonial and home penal policies right up to her death at the age of eighty-four.

Despite such an impressive amount of personal and political achievement Margery Fry has been curiously and unjustifiably neglected by historians and biographers. In contrast with her great friend, Eleanor Rathbone, about whom four major biographies have now been published,² there is only one full-length study of Margery Fry.³ Moreover, despite her undoubted fame at the time of her death, and her extensive, original contributions to criminological discourse, Fry is by no means a well-known figure nowadays outside some sectors of criminology. Of course, unlike Rathbone, Fry did not become an MP, although she came close to standing for election to parliament in the first post-suffrage election of 1918. Nevertheless, it is plausible to argue that her political influence was actually greater than that of her friend and her life is therefore worthy of study. As Pat Thane has remarked, 'it is questionable whether a backbench MP had more power or influence than . . . leading [women] pressure group activists.'⁴ In Rathbone's case her problems in gaining political influence were arguably compounded by the fact that she was an independent MP and did not belong to any political party. Whereas (as Susan Cohen's recent research tends to suggest) Rathbone was often rebuffed by ministers and civil servants, Margery Fry was held in high regard in the corridors of power.⁵

Neglect of Margery Fry is possibly the direct result of the fact that her influence was mainly displayed away from the great political theatres such as the House of Commons. This study therefore proposes that in researching women's relationship with political life in the aftermath of suffrage, we need to go beyond a preoccupation with the few women who achieved elected office, and interrogate other ways in which feminist women inhabited political, as well as intellectual elites.⁶ The focus of this article therefore is a political life lived away from the main stage, in the wings or—to change the metaphor—in the shadows, one which despite its back-room nature, proved as significant as many roles that were more publicly displayed.

An under-explored yet crucial political role in the aftermath of suffrage—and one in which Margery Fry thrived—was the back-room role of the 'statutory woman', a shadowy but essential political role. In a memoir published in 1970, Lady Stocks, feminist activist and veteran of many government advisory committees, described the genesis of the 'statutory woman' and fixed the latter's creation in the aftermath of suffrage:

Thanks to a changed climate of opinion with regard to women in public life which followed the First World War, it became a regular ministerial practice for every government committee or Royal Commission to contain at least one woman... But though the country as a whole teemed with able and public-spirited women, those who sojourned in the 'corridors of power' did not know who or where they were, and took little trouble to find out... As a result, the few they *did* know about were used over and over again. They became a kind of stage army appearing on one government assignment after another. At a later stage somebody—I forget who—described them very aptly as 'statutory women'.⁷

Margery Fry was the quintessential 'statutory woman'. Like Stocks and many others, probably her most significant formal office was as a Justice of the Peace (JP), and Fry was frequently invited to take part in ad hoc inquiries related to the criminal justice system, for example the 1927 Departmental Committee on Street Offences. On other occasions she was called on to provide expert evidence, as in the case of the 1929 House of Commons Select Committee on Capital Punishment and she participated for many years in long-running advisory bodies for the Home Office and the Colonial Office. It was therefore behind the scenes, and as an agent within what would nowadays be referred to as 'civil society' that Margery Fry's influence could be found.

The present author's perspective on Margery Fry differs from that of the single extant biography, Enid Huws Jones' *The Essential Amateur* in several ways. Firstly, Jones' work was essentially an 'official' biography. It was published seven years after Fry's death and written at the behest of her beloved niece, Pamela (Roger Fry's daughter). The current research draws not only on Fry's personal papers (used by Jones with Pamela's permission, but which have now been donated by the family to Somerville College) but also on sources that were unavailable to or unused by Jones, for example government material held in the National Archives, the personal papers of Fry's friends and colleagues and the records of the many organisations she joined. The use of government papers is especially relevant to the current article as they amply illuminate her entanglements with bureaucracy as a 'statutory woman'.

Secondly, this new study questions Jones' interpretation of Margery Fry as 'the essential amateur' (despite the fact that it was Fry's own phrase) in the light of contemporary debates over gender and interpretations of professionalism, in particular the largely false dichotomy which is sometimes assumed to have existed between 'professional' and 'amateur' work in social movements, pressure groups and academic discourse during the early twentieth century. As I have argued elsewhere, women on government committees were amateurs only in the sense that they lacked the specific professional status and experience of their male colleagues, deficiencies which were more than made up by their other qualities.⁸ In the context of her penal reform interests, it has already been argued that Margery Fry made an important contribution to criminological thought and research.⁹ While not appearing to accept a crude division between public and private spheres, Jones portrayed her subject through a gendered lens of the personal

and domestic, which perhaps reflects her primary dependence on private letters as source material. Yet the appellation ‘essential amateur’ referenced Margery Fry’s public work for causes such as penal reform as well as her role as a ‘statutory woman’. As this article demonstrates, Fry’s public work was not confined to metropolitan matters but ranged over many of the networks and issues that were dear to feminists in the aftermath of suffrage.

This article’s approach (and that of the wider study of which it forms a part) is cognisant of developments in biographical research methodology that have occurred since the 1970s, particularly in the genre of feminist biography. Particularly pertinent are conceptual understandings of ‘life-cycle’ and the recognition that individuals—even ones as (in some senses) exceptional as Margery Fry—lived their lives as social beings enmeshed in multiple networks of family, friendship, work and politics.¹⁰ Their lives were also located within temporal boundaries: significant events—wars, for example—and the more subtle effects of social change together contributed to the shifting directions their lives took. The generational cohort to whom Margery Fry belonged could not fail to be affected by the world wars they lived through, as well as by the political and social impact of women’s suffrage. Therefore this biographical account positions her not only as a highly gifted individual but also as someone whose life course underwent a series of transformations that were attributable to the effects of war and of the enlarged opportunities for women that stemmed from suffrage. This article thus attempts to follow the methodology described by June Purvis in which feminists ‘study the material forces that have shaped . . . lives and experiences, even though these experiences may be mediated through the “lenses” of the individuals’ own histories, ideologies and cultures’.¹¹

The present study situates Margery Fry as a feminist subject of a feminist biography. By taking a broad definition of feminists as people ‘whose words or actions indicate that they perceived gendered inequalities in social relationships and in access to power, and who consciously decided to take some action, however small, to improve the status or condition of women’,¹² it is possible to include within the definition women (like Fry) whose actions told eloquently of their feminism even if they generally preferred not to self-label as such. Writing in the early 1960s, before the advent of ‘second wave’ feminism, Jones underplayed Fry’s feminism, even as she details her battles for women’s right to vote, be educated, and to have worthwhile careers.¹³ Yet Fry’s own letters, read from a feminist standpoint, provide abundant testament to her feminist principles, while her actions demonstrated repeated commitment to gender equality. Moreover, while she rarely took on formal roles in feminist societies, she remained in frequent contact with women’s organisations throughout her life. Since Jones’ work was published understanding of the nuances of feminism among the suffrage generation has changed, and recent historians have developed their knowledge of the networks to which Margery Fry belonged. This article therefore tries to place her feminism more firmly in the foreground.

Margery Fry’s public activities were so extensive—and so well documented in the archives—that a short article cannot hope to do justice to them all. Therefore,

after a brief biographical sketch of her family background and early years, this article concentrates on some of the many themes in Margery Fry's post-suffrage career, and reflects on the ways in which she was able to inhabit her role as a public servant and pressure group activist on a national and international platform, pursuing a political life from the shadows. The role she occupied might now be described as that of a 'public intellectual'. As Collini remarks, the prefix 'public' to the term 'intellectual' is a recent addition,¹⁴ inspired perhaps by the urge of academics to communicate with the world 'outside'. In Margery Fry's day, intellectuals in Britain were not confined to academic institutions: in fact in the case of women they were highly unlikely to hold university posts. Moreover, female intellectuals had—especially before the First World War—a popular image as unsexed bluestockings. But as Collini makes clear, inherent in the prefix-less term 'intellectual' is the notion of an educated, thinking person who communicates with the general public, not only on matters in which he/she has expertise, but also on general social and political matters.¹⁵ This resonates with Fry's self-deprecating self-description as a 'life-long dilettante' when she succeeded a parade of judges, clergymen and cabinet ministers to become the first woman to give the annual Clarke Hall lecture in 1940.¹⁶ While 'dilettante' was not strictly accurate on this occasion as the subject—youth justice—was something on which she was undoubtedly an expert, there were other times when she truly represented Collini's ideal type of an 'intellectual', for example in her broadcasts on the BBC.

Margery Fry was born in 1874¹⁷ into a prominent and well-connected Quaker family, which valued public service very highly.¹⁸ Her father was a judge and her uncle ran the eponymous cocoa company based in Bristol. The family was a large one; she had two older brothers and four older sisters and the family was later completed by the birth of her younger sister, Ruth. The Frys were a conventional, upper middle-class family, especially in relation to the gendered upbringing of their children, as Margery recalled 'my parents weren't at all in favour of girls doing—having careers—or doing outside work'.¹⁹ Whereas Roger was sent away to school and was expected to go to University, the Fry girls were mainly educated at home. Therefore, like many other women of her generation, Margery's feminism was probably kindled by her own desire for an education. In her late teens she was briefly sent to study at the Misses Lawrence's boarding school in Brighton (which later became Roedean). Even then, she faced a difficult task in convincing her parents that she should be allowed to go onto University, but it is clear that, although conflicted, she was determined to win the fight. Writing to her school friend, Dorothy Scott, to whom she evidently could talk frankly about her ambitions, she explained that she felt like a 'beast':

You see what they say is, if I really wish to go, I may, but that they can't help wishing I could be happy & contented to stay at home, & I know that really & seriously they do like having us at home.²⁰

Eventually her parents agreed that she could go to Somerville Hall at Oxford, on condition that she was not to sit for any examinations.

Somerville seems to have further shaped Margery Fry's feminism, both through exposure to political discussion and through the chance it gave her to reflect on what her future life might be. The higher education of women was still a controversial matter in the 1890s, and the women's university colleges were at the forefront of the fight for equality. While at Somerville Margery learnt the basics of political debate alongside Eleanor Rathbone and several other friends in a society called 'the Associated Prigs', and continued to make and cultivate friendships and connections which later became the basis of her extensive personal and political networks.²¹ She later recalled in a radio interview that:

when one went to College one found all one's own contemporaries were taking jobs and were having careers, and I suppose it was a natural kind of ambition made one do it. There was very little for a woman to be ambitious about when I was a girl. I remember walking up and down in Somerville garden with Eleanor Rathbone, and discussing whether there was anything which it was worthwhile for a girl to be ambitious about. . . Parliament was shut to us, and the law was shut to us. . .²²

Clearly Margery did want a career, although the ones she most desired were unavailable. However, after a further period at home and a good deal of negotiation with her parents, she was permitted in 1899 to take up a post as Somerville librarian and secretarial assistant to the Principal, initially on a trial basis. From there, she went to take up the position of Warden of the first women's hall (later University House) at Birmingham University in 1904, where she stayed for ten years. (This move, at the age of 30, was her first to take place without the prior permission of her parents.) Such was her formal career up until the outbreak of war in 1914, the year that Margery turned forty. Her letters, however, suggest that this would not have been her chosen path in an ideal world. Rather, as the quote above hints, she had desires to be a lawyer like her father, or a politician.²³ Both of these options were, of course, closed to her until 1918–1919.

Nevertheless, even before the advent of suffrage and its attendant opening of law and politics to women, Margery Fry took her first steps towards a career in the political shadows. In her Birmingham years she pursued a voluntary, quasi-public career alongside her paid employment, which included membership of several educational bodies, including Staffordshire Education Committee, and the governing bodies of Dudley Teacher Training College, King Edward School, Birmingham University and Somerville College. Like many public-spirited women of her generation she thereby established a political presence at a local or regional level in what we today would recognise as the realm of 'civil society', before women had the parliamentary vote. In this way she gained valuable experience which would stand her in good stead when more opportunities opened in the aftermath of suffrage.

Margery Fry's embrace of ambition was not merely a personal matter. Her employment in Birmingham also gave her a chance to advance women's and girls' education, a vital feminist cause if ever there was one. The prospectus for University House emphasised that Birmingham University gave 'exceptional

opportunities to women' by offering them courses and degrees in all its faculties.²⁴ The cause of women's education—and her paid employment—accounted for what was probably Fry's first visit to Whitehall; a lobby of the Board of Education for a grant for University House in the company of Neville Chamberlain.²⁵ Her Birmingham years also cemented her position within the wider women's movement, a profile which had its roots in her Somerville connections. Old Somervillians—including her close friend Dorothy Scott—had moved into Birmingham's Women's Settlement and were visible not only in the local National Union of Women Workers (NUWW) branch but also the local suffrage society. Margery Fry was for a time the Birmingham NUWW branch president and she was also involved in the activities of the constitutionalist suffrage society (affiliated to the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies) in the locality.²⁶ The NUWW, later renamed the National Council of Women, became a vital element in the national feminist-criminal justice network which Margery helped to construct in the aftermath of suffrage.²⁷

The war years represent a watershed in Margery Fry's personal history. This turning point came not only for personal reasons but also because of the era's great events—war, enfranchisement and the 'flu pandemic. However, even before the outbreak of war she planned to make significant changes in her life. The catalyst for these changes was the news that at the age of forty, she had inherited a share of her uncle's fortune, which, while not making her very rich, did ensure that she would no longer have to work in order to maintain her independence. The legacy enabled her to contemplate a career in unpaid public work. Initially she planned to leave her post with Birmingham University and continue a career of public service in the West Midlands. She expected to continue with her committee work (which by then included activities associated with the implementation of the 1913 Mental Deficiency Act) and intended eventually to launch into politics by standing for election to Birmingham City Council. She told her friend Dorothy Scott of her plan to leave her job, admitting that she would hate to see the student 'hostel' in other hands, but that she did not want to 'sit too tight', and there was 'a duty for women who ha[d] the wherewithal to do public work'.²⁸ Yet it is striking that the public service she had in mind was still voluntary and within a local arena: at this stage national politics was not open to women—not even seemingly ambitious ones like Margery Fry. Nevertheless, some national invitations were starting to come her way by 1914—for example in connection with the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, by then led by her old friend, Eleanor Rathbone²⁹—and she did anticipate that leaving her job would make more frequent trips to London a possibility. A life as a 'statutory woman' was already a possibility.

The war inevitably produced some turmoil in Margery Fry's private life. Her pre-war plans were abandoned soon after the outbreak of war when she moved Belgian refugees into the house she had intended to live in with a friend, Rose Sidgwick. While gaps in the archive mean we can ascertain little about her private emotions, the letters of others indicate that in 1916 she was shaken by news of the death at the front near Abbéville of an Australian mathematician,

Bruce McLaren—whom she had known in Birmingham—and by the revelation of the depth of his feelings towards her.³⁰ Then the 'flu pandemic of 1918 killed Rose Sidgwick—a very close friend with whom Margery had had quite an intense relationship (at least on Rose's side). Margery's father, Edward Fry, had also passed away during the War, admittedly at the end of a very long life. Margery herself had had a strenuous time running the Quaker war relief effort (for the Friends War Relief Committee) in Eastern France, near the Front with Germany, where, despite her efforts to play down the danger in her letters home, she had experienced extreme fear in addition to many physical privations.

Yet there were aspects of her wartime life that were liberating, even for a woman in her forties who feared she had become a stereotypical 'old maid'. After years of living in female-only environments she found great enjoyment in the company of the men in the Friends War Relief Committee's operations.³¹ Margery Fry was not the sort of feminist who shunned male company, although she also enjoyed many close friendships with women throughout her life. After a couple of years in France she returned to England determined to play some part in the (re)construction of Britain. Even before the passage of the Representation of the People Act, Margery Fry seems to have envisaged a new role for herself in national politics rather on the local/regional stage that had confined her in the pre-war years. At first her plans were to campaign for the Education Bill that HAL Fisher (husband of one of her Somerville friends, Lettice Ilbert) was introducing into parliament. Later, she decided to take over as secretary of a small, not very important pressure group: the Penal Reform League (PRL). It was therefore at this point—in late 1918—that Margery Fry embarked upon the work with which she was to become most firmly associated.

After suffrage, Margery Fry was therefore able to fully inhabit the role of 'statutory woman', now on a national and international basis. She was also launched into pressure group, rather than party politics (although she did become a member of the Labour party). First, however, her place within the women's movement was acknowledged when she became a member of an international delegation of women to the Paris peace conference in 1919. On 10 April the delegation, which represented the International Council of Women met with President Wilson of the United States to lobby for the representation of women at all levels of the projected League of Nations organisation.³² Margery Fry was thus an integral part of the international feminist network which has attracted recent attention from historians.³³ She continued to maintain an international profile in later life, aided by her extensive opportunities for travel and superb networking skills. Her contacts ranged from pressure groups to government officials abroad and at home. Although not a pacifist, she retained informal connections with members of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and she later served as an official British government representative on several occasions, for example at the International Penal and Penitentiary Commission (IPPC).

By the early 1920s Margery Fry had developed from the somewhat stereotypical female educationalist³⁴ and committee woman she had arguably been before suffrage, into a pressure group activist and sought-after expert on criminal justice

with a national—and, as mentioned above, international—profile. After taking the helm at the PRL she steered the small organisation into a merger with the larger, wealthier Howard Association to form the Howard League for Penal Reform (HLPR). Her appointment as a magistrate in 1919 bestowed the status that provided her entrée to the world of the 'statutory woman' at central government level—as well as giving hands-on experience of the administration of justice—and in 1921 she helped to establish the Magistrates' Association.³⁵ Her intellectual, as well as her practical, organisational self, had full reign in HLPR activities: in the same year the *Howard Journal*, which she initially edited, was launched. Family duties remained important to Margery, but were suitably combined with public work. After the war she moved to London, to a house a stone's throw from Holloway Prison—where she was honorary Education Officer—living with her brother Roger and his (then) teenage children. Although in the mid-1920s Margery gave up the post of Howard League secretary in order to be free to travel and for a brief sojourn as Principal of Somerville College, she continued to work for penal reform for the remaining forty years of her life.

It was therefore in the post-suffrage period, once she was based in London, that Margery's career in the political shadows really took off. From the early 1920s onwards she was in constant demand for government committees—this time national ones, rather than local or regional. This was probably facilitated by her move to London, yet her later periods living in Oxford and (briefly during the Second World War) with a sister in Buckinghamshire did nothing to stem the flow of invitations from Whitehall departments, especially the Home Office.

By no means all Margery Fry's public activities were connected with the criminal justice system. The education of women remained a matter of vital interest to her. In 1919 she joined the University Grants Committee as the representative for women. She remained on this body for nearly thirty years, travelling around England, Scotland and Wales to inspect universities and their facilities. The education of young people was one of her passions and one of her main areas of expertise. Undoubtedly she saw this role as a 'job' and welcomed the small amounts of financial compensation it generated.³⁶ In the second half of her life she was able to travel extensively, not only in Britain and Europe but also in Asia and North America, and she saw to it that wherever she went she learnt something about the prison system and arrangements for higher education. After a lengthy tour of the western United States and Canada she confessed in a newsletter to alumni of University House that she was impressed by the fact that a college education was so widely available in the USA: 'from the point of view of raising good citizens . . . this mass education has much to be said for it.'³⁷

In the 1930s—by which time Margery Fry was in her sixties—she renewed her interest in pressure groups and political campaigning. In 1933 her travels lecturing on behalf of the Universities China Mission took her to universities across China. This encouraged a great interest in that country, and when China was attacked by Japan in 1937 Margery quickly became a leading member of the China Campaign Committee (CCC). A coalition of left-leaning individuals in the Popular Front mode,³⁸ the CCC was formed in the late summer of 1937 in response to the

Japanese offensive in mainland China that started on 7 July. Less renowned than the contemporary efforts to aid Republican Spain, the CCC nevertheless represents an important moment in the progression of much of the British left away from pacifist leanings. It was also a quintessentially voluntary effort, bringing together a coalition of forces to provide humanitarian aid to China as well as to support its political cause.³⁹ Margery Fry was at times either the chairman or the vice-chairman of the CCC, swapping the posts with the Left Book Club publisher, Victor Gollancz. She continued to speak at meetings on the Campaign's behalf until 1946, when, according to the CCC secretary, she resigned for 'political reasons'.⁴⁰ In the early 1940s she confided in the Birmingham students that 'Penal Reform and the needs of China are the causes nearest my heart'.⁴¹

Margery Fry also continued to be involved in international lobbying work. In the company of many feminists of her generation she had a hope—but not necessarily an expectation—that the League of Nations could become an engine of international political change. In the late 1930s she travelled each year to Geneva to lobby the League of Nations Assembly over the introduction of minimum standards for prisoners. In 1926 the HLPF together with the Society of Friends' (Quakers) Penal Reform Committee (PRC) launched a campaign for an international charter of minimum standards for prisoners and, with the backing of the UK's League of Nations Union, succeeded in getting the International Federation of League of Nations Societies to support a call that the League Assembly should discuss the charter.⁴² Thereafter women activists from the HLPF and PRC lobbied the League Assembly when it met each autumn, with—it must be admitted—only limited success given the weight of other social questions on the Assembly's agenda. Margery Fry (who had effectively instigated the international charter campaign) joined the lobbying party in Geneva in 1935 and returned for the following three years. In 1939 she was appointed a British government representative to the IPPC, and although that organisation was in abeyance during the war years, she attended its final, post-war conference in 1950 and was influential in the construction of the charter for prisoners eventually adopted by the United Nations in 1955. Margery Fry was therefore an integral part of a vitally important international human rights campaign, which was concerned with all types of detainees, both political and non-political, and all prisoners, male and female.⁴³

Margery Fry's interest in human rights and her profile in academia were also exemplified by membership of the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning (SPSL). Established in May 1933 as the Academic Assistance Council, weeks after the accession of Hitler to the German Chancellorship, the SPSL sought to assist refugee academics from Europe. Fry was one of only two women signatories to the SPSL founding statement, alongside several eminent male intellectuals, including Beveridge, Rutherford, Keynes and A. V. Hill:⁴⁴ it is hard to think of more illustriously intellectual company. However, having examined the SPSL archive, it seems clear that Margery Fry was invited onto this body mainly because—like so many of the government committees she attended—the Society needed to be seen to have a woman member with a credible reputation

as an intellectual. The SPSL Fry archive shows that she was seldom able to attend the meetings due to her many other responsibilities, and in 1938 she tried to resign because she felt she was no use, although she always sent a cheque. The reply she received from the SPSL secretary was telling: her resignation was not accepted because her membership demonstrated 'publicly her full co-operation' with the objects of the organisation and the work benefited 'from her name'. She admitted defeat and agreed to stay on 'in a symbolic capacity'.⁴⁵ This role as a publicly recognised 'name' to bring gravitas to pressure groups was one that Margery shared with perhaps a few hundred other 'celebrities' of the time, whose illustrious names were attached to the letter heads of the organisations to which they lent support. However, while this incident suggests that she did not wish to merely give passive support to a cause, but ideally preferred active involvement where possible, it also demonstrates some of the perils of being one of a small number of well-known, politically active women.

Margery Fry continued to inhabit her roles of public advisor and pressure group activist after the Second World War and her involvement remained 'hands on' even when she was in her eighties. She may have been invited onto committees as the 'statutory woman' at first, but before very long civil servants and ministers must have known what they were going to get: someone who would constantly suggest and agitate for schemes of reform and improvement with dogged persistence. After all, this had been her way since the days on Staffordshire Education Committee, if not before. I will give as an example the work of the Colonial Penal Advisory Committee. When she joined this body in November 1939 the Chairman welcomed her saying that 'her experience would be of great value particularly in considering matters in connection with women and children'. But at only her second meeting she began to advance a proposal which anticipated a key theme of her later years of campaigning: that criminal justice should incorporate elements of compensation and/or restitution from offender to victim.⁴⁶ This idea was, of course not applicable only to 'women and children'. Moreover, it points the way to 'restorative justice', which many people think is a much more recent concept within criminal justice discourse.

The evidence suggests that Margery Fry was held in high regard, not only for her ability to innovate and initiate policy, but also, I would argue, for her work ethic and willingness for 'hands on' involvement. She herself would probably have ascribed this to her gender, or her upbringing and education, and ideals of feminine service, but the early years on Staffordshire Education Committee and myriad other West Midlands committees had also played their part as a time when she travelled throughout the county visiting schools and inspecting needlework. On one occasion in 1922 she reminded women magistrates of the necessity for first-hand experience, urging them to see 'everything'—even the punishment cells—when they visited a prison, and to taste the food.⁴⁷ As a member of the government's Advisory Council on the Treatment of Offenders from 1944 until her death aged eighty-four in 1958, Fry led the questioning of witnesses and she was so indispensable that the chairman deferred to her opinion on many occasions.⁴⁸ But her knowledge was both intellectual and practical: for example

her enthusiasm for restitution sprang partly from her experience as a magistrate and partly from voracious reading of the social sciences, especially anthropology.⁴⁹

Looking at Margery Fry's life as a whole, it is clear that there was a step change in her career in civil society around the time of the First World War and the granting of suffrage, broadly taking her from a local to a national—or even international—stage.⁵⁰ Whether this was directly because of these 'big' events or whether it was the result of more personal, biographical factors, such as the stage that she reached in the life-cycle at this time, is a moot point. As with so many other people at that time, world events played a part in the choices she made and the experiences she had. For example, she may have been encouraged to take up the issue of penal reform because of first-hand accounts of prison conditions from friends who spent time in jail as conscientious objectors during the First World War. Equally, her Quaker background and family may have been a direct influence, in the form of an aunt who urged the young people of her 'circle' to take up prison reform.⁵¹ However, Margery's correspondence indicates that she was merely looking for a 'job' in 1918, and it just happened to be the penal reform one that came her way. Writing to Dorothy Scott, she betrayed her private concerns, musing whether there was secretarial assistance or a salary for the post of PRL secretary. 'If I have to send the notices out the society will fail hideously', she commented.⁵² Nevertheless, she continued to be deeply interested in criminal justice for the rest of her life, which suggests that even if it was a 'job' to start with, it soon became a passion. She justifiably always characterised her public activities as 'work': Margery Fry and the women she worked alongside consciously adopted a 'professional' approach to whatever they did, whether the work was paid or unpaid.⁵³ It may be that she was a workaholic, and she certainly believed in putting sustained effort into any task she undertook, yet she also had what has been called a 'hinterland', a love of travel, of art, music and bird-watching. There were family duties too: playing hostess when her brother's Bloomsbury and art acquaintances (including Picasso) called, being *de facto* mother to his children, caring for aged parents earlier in her life and for older sisters later. Yet 'work' was a constant stimulus and motivator. Even on holiday no city could be visited without a tour of the local prison and university campus.

Undoubtedly, the war and women's suffrage allowed Margery Fry to pursue her work on a national rather than a local stage. Women's suffrage gave political women a new legitimacy in policy formulation. Margery's reputation as a committee stalwart—and star—may have been starting to spread beyond the West Midlands by 1914, but the war and the granting of suffrage without question increased demand for 'statutory women' of her type in Whitehall. Her move to London probably facilitated her committee career as it increased networking opportunities, although family connections, Oxford and Birmingham had already given her an advantage in this respect.

There were, however, limits to Margery Fry's career which were almost certainly a result of her gender. The early ambitions to practise law and/or become a member of parliament were not realised and were soon abandoned. Her greatest opportunity came in the 1918 election, when the Bristol society for equal

citizenship asked her to stand in a local parliamentary seat, but she refused to do so unless endorsed by the Labour Party. At the time she confessed to Dorothy Scott that 'politics was the only thing I had any real ambition for, but I daresay that'll pass!'⁵⁴ It seems, however that it did not really pass: in a radio interview towards the end of her life she confessed that she was sorry that she had never been a member of parliament.⁵⁵ Had she lived a little longer, or been born a little later, she would have been a strong candidate for nomination as a life peer, an honour which was achieved by her friend and fellow magistrate, Barbara Wootton.

But, as argued at the start of this article, it is quite likely that Margery Fry had more political power in the shadows as a policy advisor—even as a pressure group activist⁵⁶—than she ever would have had as a politician. Her career demonstrates what could be achieved politically in the aftermath of suffrage—admittedly by an exceptionally gifted and charismatic woman—without elected office. Among the many policies on which she has direct influence were the introduction of legal aid, the granting of funds for criminological research, and the state compensation scheme for victims of violent crime (the latter enacted after her death). Few elected politicians have such a list to their names. As far as the law was concerned, she seems to have been content to be a volunteer magistrate rather than a judge like her father. Her musings late in life do suggest a little regret that opportunities for women of her generation had been so circumscribed, together with admiration for younger generations who combined careers with marriage.⁵⁷ But broadly, she was content to be 'the essential amateur', at least in public, and even though this role was circumscribed as well as legitimated by both gender and class, she made the most of it. Her shadowy role was not without its rewards as it enabled her to travel within the UK and abroad, something which she clearly thoroughly enjoyed.

It is noticeable that Margery Fry, who before suffrage had lived her adult life mainly in women-only educational communities, spent much of her later life on committees in which she was either the only woman or one of a small minority of female representatives. Frequently she was appointed to be *the* representative of women, clearly an impossible task, but an essential one nonetheless. Although she maintained in the post-1918 years connections to women's organisations and feminist bodies including the National Council of Women and the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene, her most significant activities took place in the service of non-gendered political causes, ranging from penal reform to solidarity with war-torn China. While a consequence of suffrage, this situation did not make feminism or the women's movement redundant. Involvement in the causes that mattered in their own time by women like Fry who had longed for the Vote, was not the abandonment of feminism and of the women's cause, as it has sometimes been characterised, but a fulfilment of the promise of equal rights. As Karen Offen argues, women political activists in Europe moved increasingly adopted a new terminology of 'humanism' instead of 'feminism' in the interwar years, and Margery Fry can be seen to be a part of that alteration.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, after the First World War politically engaged women like Margery Fry possessed enhanced

ability to influence policy, not only through suffrage but also through their role in civil society, in pressure groups and as advocates for a range of causes.

Notes

- [1] For example, P. Rock (1990) *Helping Victims of Crime: the Home Office and the rise of victim support in England and Wales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- [2] M. Stocks (1949) *Eleanor Rathbone: a biography* (London: Gollancz); J. Alberti (1996) *Eleanor Rathbone* (London: Sage); S. Pederson (2004) *Eleanor Rathbone and the Politics of Conscience* (New Haven: Yale University Press); S. Cohen (2010) *Rescue the Perishing: Eleanor Rathbone and the refugees* (London: Vallentine Mitchell).
- [3] E. Huws Jones (1965) *Margery Fry: the essential amateur* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- [4] P. Thane (1996) Women, Liberalism and Citizenship, 1918–30, in E. F. Biagini (Ed.) *Citizenship and Community: liberals, radicals and collective identities in the British Isles, 1865–1931* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) pp. 66–92, p. 77.
- [5] Cohen, *Rescue the Perishing*; A. Logan (2010) Women and the Provision of Criminal Justice Policy Advice: lessons from England and Wales 1944–64, *British Journal of Criminology*, 50, pp. 1077–1093.
- [6] Women's role in formal political contexts after suffrage has been examined by M. Pugh (2000) *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914–1999* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).
- [7] M. Stocks (1970) *My commonplace Book* (London: Peter Davies), p. 165.
- [8] For discussion of gender and professionalism in relation to voluntary work, see A. Logan (2006) Professionalism and the Impact of England's First Women Justices, 1920–1950, *The Historical Journal*, 49, pp. 833–850.
- [9] A. Logan (2010) Feminist Criminology in Britain circa 1920–1960: education, agency and activism outside the academy, in J. Spence, S. J. Aiston & M. Meikle (Eds) *Women, Education, and Agency, 1600–2000* (New York: Routledge), pp. 204–222.
- [10] For reflections on feminist networks and biography, see L. Stanley (1986) Feminism and Friendship: two essays on Olive Schreiner, *Studies in Sexual Politics*, 8 (University of Manchester) unpublished paper; L. Stanley (1992) Romantic Friendship: some issues in researching lesbian history and biography, *Women's History Review*, 1, pp. 193–216.
- [11] J. Purvis (1994) Doing Feminist Women's History: researching the lives of women in the suffragette movement in Edwardian England, in M. Maynard & J. Purvis (Eds) *Researching Women's Lives from a Feminist Perspective* (London: Taylor and Francis), pp. 166–189, p. 167.
- [12] A. Logan (2008) *Feminism and Criminal Justice: a historical perspective* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan) pp. 4–5.
- [13] See, for example, the discussion of Fry's opposition to restrictions on the number of women admitted to Oxford University: Jones, *Margery Fry*, p. 147.
- [14] S. Collini, (2006) *Absent Minds: intellectuals in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 436.
- [15] *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- [16] M. Fry (1940) *The Ancestral Child: the fifth Clarke Hall lecture* (London: Clarke Hall Fellowship), p. 7.
- [17] Biographical details in this section are drawn from Margery Fry's personal papers, held at Somerville College, Oxford (henceforward MFP). For Fry's background and upbringing, see also Huws Jones, *Essential Amateur*.

- [18] MFP 41/4, transcript of BBC broadcast 'London Calling Asia: Personal Call', 10 March 1956.
- [19] Ibid.
- [20] MFP 34/1, letter to Dorothy Scott, 20 Aug. 1893. Scott was the niece of the *Manchester Guardian* editor, C. P. Scott.
- [21] For the Associated Prigs, see P. Adams (1996) *Somerville for Women: an Oxford college 1879–1993* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 129–130.
- [22] 'London Calling Asia'.
- [23] MFP 34/3, letter to Dorothy Scott, 28 Sept. 1897.
- [24] University of Birmingham Special Collections (henceforward UBSC): University House brochure, n.d. [before 1914].
- [25] UBSC. University House Committee minutes, 13 Feb. 1908.
- [26] Birmingham City Library MS841B, records of Birmingham women's organisations.
- [27] Logan, *Feminism and Criminal Justice*.
- [28] MFP 35/6, letter to Dorothy Scott, 17 May 1914.
- [29] Rathbone invited her to join the NUWSS executive in 1913: MFP 27/5.
- [30] A letter from Fry's University House colleague, Beatrice Orange, is particularly forthright regarding McLaren's feelings. MFP 31/7, letter dated 3 Dec. 1916.
- [31] MFP 8/2, letter to Mariabella Fry [mother], 15 Oct. 1915.
- [32] K. Offen (2000) *European Feminisms 1700–1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), p. 262.
- [33] For example Offen, *European Feminisms*; L. J. Rupp (1997) *Worlds of Women: the making of an international women's movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- [34] It should be noted that Margery Fry avoided a teaching career. Her involvement in education was focused almost entirely on administration and policy.
- [35] Logan, *Feminism and Criminal Justice*.
- [36] MFP 8/7, letter to Mariabella Fry, 1 Feb. 1920.
- [37] UBSC: University House newsletter, 1932.
- [38] For the involvement of non-Communists in the popular front, see M. Pugh (2006) 'The Liberal Party and the Popular Front', *English Historical Review*, 121, pp. 1327–1350; D. Blaazer (1992) *The Popular Front and the Progressive Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- [39] For the activities of the CCC, see A. Clegg (1989) *Aid China* (Beijing: New World Press). For British attitudes towards the crisis in China, see J. K. J. Perry (2011) 'Powerless and Frustrated: Britain's relationship with China during the opening years of the second Sino-Japanese War, 1937–1939', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 22, pp. 408–430.
- [40] Clegg, *Aid China*, p. 164. The 'political reasons' probably had something to do with the pervasive Communist influence on the Campaign by this juncture. The CCC was anyway replaced by a new organisation following the Communist takeover of China in 1949.
- [41] UBSC: University House newsletter, 1942.
- [42] *Howard Journal* II, 2 (1927) pp. 93–97. See also Howard League for Penal Reform (1926) *An International Convention for Prisoners: an appeal to the League of Nations*.
- [43] For a brief account of the international work of the HLPR, see G. Rose (1961) *The Struggle for Penal Reform* (London: Stevens) pp. 314–321.
- [44] Academic Assistance Council Founding Statement, available at <http://academic-refugees.org/founding-statement.asp>. For the history of the SPSL, see N. Bentwich (1953) *The Rescue and Achievement of Refugee Scholars* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff), and W. [Lord] Beveridge (1959) *A Defence of Free Learning* (London: Oxford University Press).

- [45] Bodleian Library, Oxford: SPSL archive, letter from MF dated 17 Jan. 1938.
- [46] The National Archives CO912/3: minutes of the Colonial Office Advisory committee on Penal Affairs (1939).
- [47] *Woman's Leader*, 8 Sept. 1922, p. 248.
- [48] Logan, 'Women and the Provision of Criminal Justice Policy Advice'.
- [49] The influences on Fry's thinking are demonstrated particularly well in her 1951 publication, *Arms of the Law* (London: Gollancz).
- [50] Margery Fry took part in an international delegation of women's organisations as early as 1919 when she met President Wilson at the Paris Peace conference.
- [51] Huws Jones, *Essential Amateur*, pp. 111–112.
- [52] MFP 35/7, letter to Dorothy Scott, 1 Dec. 1918.
- [53] Logan, 'Professionalism and the Impact of England's First Women Justices'.
- [54] MFP 35/7, letter to Dorothy Scott, 1 Dec. 1918.
- [55] 'London Calling Asia'.
- [56] Mick Ryan has argued that in Margery Fry's time at least, the HLPR was a highly influential pressure group within government. See M. Ryan (1978) *The Acceptable Pressure Group* (Farnborough: Saxon House).
- [57] 'London Calling Asia'.
- [58] Offen, *European Feminisms*, p. 255.