Popular and Smart: Why Scholarship on the Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain Still Matters

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Abstract
The history of the women's suffrage movement in the British Isles suffers from the perception that little new is left to be said. However, more than a dozen new books demonstrate that the field is still vibrant. This new scholarship illuminates not only the historical contours of feminism, but also the complex, changing political cultures of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Historians have reworked the usual chronologies to reveal the long trajectory and shifting dynamics of women's political participation in the 19th and 20th centuries. They remain sensitive to class dynamics, but also explore how region, ethnicity, religious affiliation and social networks made a difference to the way in which women conceptualized citizenship and exercised political agency. Increasingly, suffrage historians define the movement broadly and view feminism as a shifting discourse, so that even anti-suffragists are included among these categories. This new crop of books contributes to the field's ever-expanding empirical sophistication, and the best make eminently clear why the study of women's suffrage is still relevant and popular, among both scholars and the broader public.

Few areas of history successfully bridge the town-gown divide, and the British women's suffrage movement is among them. Now nearly a century since the height of the campaign, popular recognition for Britain's suffragists and suffragettes appears as vibrant as ever. Actors portraying the intrepid campaigners joined other iconographic historical figures on stage in the opening ceremonies of the 2012 London Olympics. More than 10,000 readers of London's metro.co.uk put Emmeline Pankhurst ahead of Diana, Princess of Wales in a recent International Women's Day poll ranking London's most influential women.¹ Not long before that, thousands of Britain's readers followed the heated exchange between historians June Purvis and Christopher Bearman over whether or not suffragettes were modern-day terrorists. With Bearman arguing that suffrage militants engaged in “carefully calculated, stage managed, cold-blooded crimes” not unlike al-Qaeda, and Purvis valiantly defending their noble motives and emphasizing their bloodless hands, the sensationalized debate splashed for several weeks across the pages of the BBC History Magazine, Times Higher Education, Daily Telegraph and the Sunday Telegraph.²

Yet, if women’s suffrage no longer gets top billing in academic journals or conferences, dozens of new books and articles have appeared since the 1990s and suffrage remains a popular topic for undergraduate and graduate papers.³ This scholarship has remained wedded to political and social history but it has also embraced new methodologies and made significant contributions to women's history and British studies more generally. New theories of gender, power, and politics raised provocative questions about women's place in the public sphere and offered subtle analyses of the suffrage movement's role in the construction of modern roles and identities. The methods of social history still prevail, but insights from political and social theory, as well as cultural, literary, and postcolonial studies, are making their mark. Lisa Tickner's highly innovative The Spectacle of Women

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ushered in the cultural turn with its focus on the visual and spatial dimensions of feminist organizing, and Susan Kingsley Kent’s *Sex and Suffrage* familiarized us with how post-structuralist feminist theory could illuminate analysis of pre-war and wartime feminism.

Illuminating the historical contours of feminism, this scholarship also has shed light on the creation of 20th-century political culture and public institutions. Comparative and transnational research on suffrage has expanded the scope of analysis and helped to temper a sense of English exceptionalism, and several notable studies have explored how national and imperial discourses imbricated political discourse in the British metropole and beyond. Still sensitive to class dynamics in the movement, scholars have also explored how region, ethnicity, and religious affiliation made a difference in political strategizing. Finally scholars have also begun to probe the construction of a suffrage historiography and become more self-conscious of their own roles in creating dominant narratives and interpretations. This work taken together makes it eminently clear why the study of women’s suffrage is still popular, smart, and relevant to both scholars and the public.

**The Vote in a Wider Context**

In one promising trend, scholars have reworked the usual chronologies and re-conceptualized the “political” to reveal the long trajectory and shifting dynamics of women’s political participation. Studies of the suffrage campaign must be set against the backdrop of 19th-century women’s public and political interventions. Kathryn Gleadle’s *Borderline Citizens: Women, Gender, and Political Culture in Britain, 1815–1867* offers a sophisticated analysis of how mid-19th-century women maintained complicated – and far from powerless – relationships to the body politic. Focusing on the level of the parish, Gleadle argues that women could be conceptualized as citizens in a multitude of ways, but favors the term “borderline citizens,” because their “position could never be assured” (59). Through several case studies – such as Mary Ann Gilbert, a landed proprietor in Sussex who wielded authority on issues like poor law policy and land allotment – Gleadle reveals how money and land proved more important than prescriptive gender ideals in shaping women’s roles as political agents. Her discussion also underscores the home as a political site, “whether for networking and socializing, the ideological rearing of children, the transmission of female influence, or the practice of politically informed lifestyle choices” (259). Gleadle’s analysis does not extend into the 1860s, when claims for formal citizenship emerged in response to the glaring disparities between women’s local and national political opportunities, but *Borderline Citizens* offers useful insights in its sensitive analysis of the shifting dynamics of the public sphere (258–59). It also implicitly raises the question whether, for later periods, historians’ focus on the women’s “movement” and all its concomitant organizations has elided other important ways in which women functioned as political agents.

Support for the vote has long functioned as a barometer of feminist commitment. But Julia Bush’s study of anti-suffrage activists disrupts this equation, with beneficial results. She defines the “movement” broadly and conceptualizes feminism as a shifting discourse, contingent on historical context. *Women Against the Vote* deftly reminds us of the fluidity of Britain’s political landscape at the turn-of-the-century and underscores the need to resist easy labels and superficial readings. Bush eschews “[u]nidimensional and monocausal explanations” for women’s anti-suffragism (27). Focusing on a handful of women, Bush shows that their opposition stemmed from a complex set of factors, including the belief that differentiated gender roles were essential to Britain’s progress. Socioeconomic
privilege, anxieties over labour politics and imperial responsibilities, and these women’s social networks all played a role. Bush’s careful dissection of the Oxford friendship circles that nurtured these conservative alliances is one of the most illuminating sections of the book.11 Far from narrow-minded reactionaries, these women were leaders in philanthropy, education, and work reform – “maternal reformers” in Bush’s lexicon. They were not anti-woman, nor did they advocate subservience to men. The vote simply did not appear to them as a panacea of social and political reform. Women who opposed the vote moreover shared operational modes and even some ideological positions with their pro-suffrage sisters. After the passage of the Representation of the People Act in 1918, anti-suffragists readily joined their former adversaries in citizenship education and other political work (289ff). Anti-suffragists, Bush convincingly argues, can be seen as participants in the women’s movement broadly conceived (318).

An equally expansive understanding of the women’s movement can also be found in Myriam Boussahba-Bravard’s edited volume *Suffrage Outside Suffragism: Women’s Vote in Britain, 1880–1914*. Suffragism was not coterminous with the organizations promoting it, and this volume explores the individuals and groups who engaged in pro-suffrage agitation outside of typical suffrage structures. Drawing on Jürgen Habermas’s theory of competing public spheres, Boussahba-Bravard theorizes “suffragism” as a linguistic and political space where women in non-suffrage organizations could exercise support for the vote. Most of the nine essays in the collection explore the dynamics of “double affiliation.” Few women harbored such singular devotion to the cause as, say, Annie Kenney or Christabel Pankhurst; for most, suffrage campaigning competed with family, party or organizational loyalties. Some of the collection’s central insights get lost in a tangle of definitions in the introduction, where the reader must wade through such minutely drawn categories as “suffrage outside” versus “suffrage outside suffragism,” and “inside activists” versus “outside suffragists,” but the nine essays themselves offer succinct overviews of the range of women’s activism undertaken in both party and non-party structures (e.g. National Union of Women Workers and the Women’s Co-operative Guild.) Together, they emphasize that mass democracy is not neat – “pluralism, double affiliations, majority and difference” are the realities of the public sphere (13).

*Suffrage Outside Suffragism*, along with Mitzi Auchterlonie’s *Conservative Suffragists: The Women’s Vote and The Tory Party* complicate our understanding of the spectrum of political positions available to women. No single party had emerged as the champion of women’s rights – Conservatives drew loyal feminist activists, as did the Liberals and Labour. Nor had any one group patented the meaning of feminism. As Auchterlonie demonstrates in her thorough analysis of the Conservative & Unionist Women’s Franchise Association (CUWFA), an organization neglected by most suffrage historiography, we fail to see the full-range of women’s political organizing if we insist on a definition of feminism that reflects our current understanding of the term (194). Indeed, suffragism and feminism were never co-extensive, as Lucy Delap explains in her essay on the feminist avant-garde in *Suffrage Outside Suffragism*. Exploring the constant historical processes constructing feminism’s meanings, Delap shows how the publication of *The Freewoman* in 1912 produced new connotations for the term. The ensuing backlash “enabled a new intellectual space to be developed within the women’s movement.” (240).

*Process as Politics*

Suffrage militancy is one area of perennial interest to both popular and scholarly audiences. Bombings, arson attacks, hunger strikes, and tax resistance have offered several
generations of historians plenty to unpack, and the new range of methodologies drawn from cultural history, political theory, and regional studies have allowed historians more latitude to explore the range of processes through which women became politicized and radicalized. In *The Militant Suffrage Movement: Citizenship and Resistance in Britain, 1860–1930*, Laura Mayhall interpreted militancy as a deliberate and rational strategy, grounded in historical and legal precedent, and particularly effective when executed by women. Krista Cowman arrived at a similar conclusion in her innovative study of Merseyside women’s political organizing, *“Mrs Brown Is a Man and a Brother!”: Women in Merseyside’s Political Organizations, 1890–1920*. These well-researched and persuasively argued studies are a key reason why Bearman’s accusations that suffragettes were terrorists seemed so absurd to feminist historians, who readily acknowledge the damage caused by suffragettes but also demand a thorough analysis of the violence inflicted on them.12 The field had moved on, even if popular media had not.13

More recently Krista Cowman’s *Women of the Right Spirit: Paid Organisers of the Women’s Social and Political Union, 1904–1918* by-passes the debates on militancy to ask a surprisingly novel question: How did the WSPU function as a political organization? (5). She finds that the WSPU’s more than 150 organizers came from a wide range of social and educational backgrounds and brought a remarkable mélange of talents and experiences: “Mill girls and pupil teachers were to be found working side by side with titled ladies and colonel’s wives at the Union’s headquarters” (20). The work of being an organizer was more strenuous than glamorous, but a modest salary allowed some financial and psychological independence from frequently unsupportive families. Responsibilities were heavy: organizers recruited new members and volunteers for militant actions; organized events large and small; staffed the offices, managed money, and produced fliers and newspapers; arranged for legal representation and monitored the treatment of imprisoned suffragettes. The most grueling aspects of the job were the frequent travel and public speaking. Itinerant organizers struggled with loneliness and anxiety; they adapted to irregular meals, uncomfortable sleeping arrangements, and uncertain receptions. Cowman’s painstaking work contributes greatly to our understanding of the WSPU’s inner workings and suggests some remarkable parallels between the WSPU’s extensive grassroots strategy and Barack Obama’s presidential campaign, in full swing during the year this book appeared. Both campaigns mobilized thousands of volunteers through local, grassroots organizations, and promoted the process as much as the end product.14

*The Politics of Location*

When WSPU organizers arrived in the towns and villages of Wales, Scotland and Ireland, they were sometimes perceived as doing more damage than good. Local and regional economies and cultures shaped the movement in distinctive and sometimes unpredictable ways, and itinerant organizers were liable to make glaring faux pas. Analysis of these regional dynamics constitutes one of the clearest trends in suffrage research and has brought new respect for the political work accomplished by the smaller societies in more rural areas. “Local suffrage politics was not just about building support for a national movement – at particular times the local branches were the movement,” June Hannam has observed.15 Students and researchers interested in women’s organizing off the beaten track would do well to consult Elizabeth Crawford’s stunningly comprehensive reference book *The Women’s Suffrage Movement in Britain and Ireland: A Regional Survey*.16 Her meticulous culling of details on suffrage organizing in villages and towns scattered from
Cornwall to the Orkneys, West Riding to Galway, yields many nuggets worthy of further investigation.

Building on Crawford’s achievements are new studies on Welsh and Irish suffragists. A substantial historiography already exists on the Irish and Scottish movements, but Welsh activists have received far less attention, perhaps a function of the comparatively weaker sense of a separate Welsh national identity. Ryland Wallace’s is the first book-length study to appear on the Welsh women’s movement in nearly two decades, but it makes clear that the paucity of coverage is not due to any lack of vigor among Welsh activists. Wales was a surprisingly fertile area for suffrage agitation, especially in the 19th century – nearly seventy suffrage petitions originated in Wales between 1869 and 1874. The region’s first activists were English women, like Rose Mary Crawshay and Viscountess Amberley, who imported their political passions when they married Welsh men or settled in the area; however, by the turn of the century, the movement was tapping more local talent. Inaugurated in 1892, the Welsh Union of Women’s Liberal Associations attracted almost 9,000 members within 3 years and became the main local vehicle for suffrage agitation, working to develop local support through collaborations with such organizations as Cymru Fydd (“Young Wales”).

As the national movement gained momentum in the Edwardian era, the national suffrage organizations directly targeted Wales, with lecture campaigns at seaside resorts and spa towns during the holiday season and open-air meetings at local factories, quarries and dockyard gates. The WSPU even launched a separate Welsh society in 1911 – the Cymric Suffrage Union – but quickly found the cultural loyalties tricky to negotiate. Tensions arose, for example, when militant suffragettes interrupted the National Eisteddfod in 1909 and met with local condemnation for their cultural insensitivity. Yet Wallace holds back from a thorough analysis of the local politics involved. The well-worn historical narratives defined largely by the London-based movement leave the reader to wonder whether the region’s linguistic, religious and cultural traditions made much difference to Welsh suffrage politics.

A well-defined regional analytic is more pronounced in Louise Ryan and Margaret Ward’s edited collection, *Irish Women and the Vote: Becoming Citizens*. The volume shows that the Irish suffrage movement was not a mere branch of the English movement and challenges the belief that Ireland’s suffragists were not true patriots. In Irish feminist historiography, the nationalist members of the Ladies Land League and Cumann na mBan (the Irish republican women’s paramilitary organization) received far more accolades than Irish suffragists. Similarly, the radical Constance Markievicz is better known than the moderate Anna Haslam, who steadfastly guided the 19th-century suffrage movement. Cliona Murphy and others have successfully challenged an Anglo-centric analysis, yet contributors to Ryan and Ward’s collection still find it necessary to present Irish suffragists as loyal to Ireland. Strikingly, Mary Cullen’s lead essay portrays suffragists, including those on the unionist side, as champions of republican values, broadly conceived. No single essay in the collection focuses on the challenges of sectarianism, but many allude to tensions between Protestants and Catholics, unionists and nationalists. Protestant women dominated Ireland’s early suffrage organizations in part because of their philanthropic and reform activities (xv), and the first and most prominent organization, the Dublin Women’s Suffrage Association was closely aligned with the English movement (29). These connections soon posed a liability, however, as the Home Rule Movement accelerated in the early 20th century. The formation of the more militant Irish Women’s Franchise League IWFL in 1908 provided Catholic women and nationalists an alternative. Ireland’s suffrage organizations attempted to be inclusive – the IWFL adopted both
orange and green as its colors – but were repeatedly forced to negotiate both nationalist politics and intrepid English suffragettes who failed to understand the nuances of Irish political culture. Political styles and allegiances were complicated, and Leeann Lane’s essay on the nationalist Rosamond Jacob makes the important point that most Irish suffragists did not “neatly compartmentalize the various campaigns in which they participated” (p. 171.)

These books make plain what shrewd politicians many suffrage activists were, but they also show how difficult it was to adapt the feminist message to local circumstances. Reaching across borders and seas, language barriers and cultural traditions, suffrage campaigners were forced to act locally but think nationally and internationally, learning in the process valuable lessons about comparative politics. As suffrage organizers traveled the length of the UK, Crawford has trenchantly observed, “[they] were doing much to bring the nation together.”

The Twisted Politics of War

These political lessons were severely tested in August 1914 with the coming of World War I. Confronted with a transformed national landscape, suffrage activists faced difficult choices: fight on or refocus? While there is no shortage of excellent studies on the women’s movement in the wartime years, several recent books add to our knowledge and underscore how in Britain, as elsewhere, the war revealed fault lines among feminists. Jo Vellacott’s Pacifists, Patriots and the Vote follows 4 years of internal acrimony in the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) on its way to the conclusion that World War I wreaked havoc on feminist commitments. Instead of rehashing whether or not wartime service won women the vote, Vellacott asks why suffragists failed to press for a more inclusive franchise bill in 1918? The answer, gleaned from a close reading of organizational correspondence, is sobering: “the impact of the war altered the trajectory of the women’s suffrage movement in ways that profoundly affected the outcome, and the nature of the feminism that prevailed” (p. 1.) By 1917, the NUWSS – and British feminists more generally – had lost its sense of direction and acquiesced to a bill that they would have rejected in 1913 and which left thousands of women off the voting rosters.

Vellacott meticulously retraces the NUWSS’s spiraling loss of direction. On the eve of war, NUWSS outreach had forged grassroots connections with working-class constituencies and a productive working relationship with the Labour Party and Trade Union Congress. The NUWSS had also promoted regional initiatives that loosened the conservative grip of the London-based suffragists and tilted the organization toward the democratic principles advanced by the northern-based People’s Suffrage Federation. But under the pressure of war, these alliances soon broke down and the inclusive vision disintegrated. The NUWSS underwent a painful and very personal split between supporters of Millicent Garrett Fawcett and those who joined the “peace faction” led by Helena Swanwick and Catherine Marshall. Vellacott reconstructs the showdown in February 1915, when Fawcett and her allies rejected a series of proposals to advance international understanding and send delegates to the International Women’s Peace Conference in the Hague. Dozens of members resigned in protest, and by 1917 the once dynamic organization had reverted back into a London-based, middle-class organization with narrow concerns and fearful tendencies. In a final compelling discussion, Vellacott mourns the lost opportunities in suffragists’ acquiescence to a culture of nationalism and violence.
Pacifists, Patriots and the Vote also implicitly raises a number of interpretive questions about how scholars approach the feminist past. Methodologically, Vellacott’s study offers a striking counterpoint to Susan Kingsley Kent’s influential interpretation of the essentialist turn in British wartime feminism, but it also reinscribes certain anachronisms. Pacifism is a deeply personal topic for Vellacott, who has devoted her career to exploring its various historic manifestations, and she makes little effort to hide her distaste for Fawcett and admiration for Marshall and Swanwick, whose politics more closely resemble her own. Vellacott assumes a core and immutable set of feminist beliefs, existing outside the pressures of historical context. One is left to wonder how the collective grief of a nation affected the drive for political representation. In what ways did the wartime horrors splashing across the front page shape the NUWSS’s internal debates? With jingoism and ethnocentrism flooding the newspapers, how could internationally-minded feminists maintain their convictions? The actual war is strangely absent from this study, and the reader might ask how these women experienced the “lived effects of political language,” to borrow Denise Riley’s phrase. To answer such questions, one would need a different approach, one driven less by the search for empirical certainty and more by the belief that historical insight must be gently coaxed out of diverse cultural, linguistic and visual sources.

In 1914, peace activists and internationally-minded suffragists were swimming against the prevailing tides, as Alison Fell and Ingrid Sharp’s useful volume, *The Women’s Movement in Wartime: International Perspectives, 1914–1919*, underscores in its analysis of the strained dynamics of women’s movements across war-torn Europe. Only a few essays address British women specifically – most directly, June Purvis’s essay on the Pankhursts’ wartime vitriol and Angela K. Smith’s on Major Mabel St. Clair Stobart – but the collection’s transnational view places the British movement in the wider European context. Like Fawcett and the Pankhursts, the majority of organized feminists in Europe turned their backs on “their rather vague pre-war commitment to internationalism” and resorted to nationalist arguments about a “just” or “defensive” war (11). Those who resisted faced excoriation from friends and foes or even criminal accusations, like the famed French activist, Hélène Brion. But the British women represented in this collection seemed even less willing than their Continental counterparts to take political risks. Perhaps they were exhausted by the preceding years of militancy or worried about jeopardizing a fragile situation. But maybe their conciliatory positions demonstrated the shrewdest politics of all. One might lament what looks like “selling out,” but, as Nicoletta Gullace has forcefully argued, votes for women most likely came “not by throwing bombs but by making them; not by raising children but by sending them to die.” Perhaps the contingency of war was the most powerful political weapon of all.

The Campaign Continues

All that time, energy, and money expended – toward what end? Did the vote make a difference in women’s lives or on Britain’s political landscape and public policies? The conventional answer is that the Representation of the People Act of 1918 triggered no avalanche effect. Indeed, it left a large number of women off the electoral rolls. Women’s entrance into formal politics was slow, their influence on legislation debatable, and, many historians argue that the 1920s and 1930s amounted to little more than “change without much change” (to paraphrase Margaret and Patrice Higonnet). However, *Women and Citizenship in Britain and Ireland in the Twentieth Century*, edited
by Esther Breitenbach and Pat Thane, posits another interpretation by setting the suffrage movement in the long trajectory of women’s political participation. Their study adds substantially to a historiographical shift already underway which overturns the notion that women’s campaign for political representation ended in 1918. The 1918 Act, they argue, accelerated trends that were already in place. Even before its passage, women (and not only suffrage agitators) were becoming more active in electoral politics. The movement lost effectiveness after 1918, the editors concede, and rates of women entering national office were low until after World War II, but “political activism must be gauged in more imaginative ways than the acquisition of government seats,” Lindsey Earner-Byrne astutely observes. In Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Northern Ireland, and England, a flourishing associational life heightened civic awareness and introduced women to the rough-and-tumble of political life. Some women joined political parties, but far more exercised their citizenship in non-party organizations such as the National Union of Women Workers (which became the National Council of Women in 1918), the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship or the Women’s Institutes (founded in 1915 by suffragists) and later the Townswomen’s Guilds. Women across Ireland and Britain adapted to, were shaped by, and even helped to create local political realities. Women and Citizenship implicitly demonstrates that much work remains to fill out our understanding of women’s political influence and participation in the post-1918 years. Organizational histories, membership figures, and sketches of women’s contributions are essential, but there is so much more to know. What additional insights might a cultural or comparative analysis yield? In her chapter on Irish women’s voluntarism, Lindsey Earner-Byrne considers how religion affected the direction of postwar Irish feminism. She points to Catholicism as “a potential theatre of operation for women,” but notes that “as long as women in general organized around religion rather than gender their critical instincts tended to be ‘neutralized’ ” (p. 100.) Is this insight applicable to the English, Welsh or Scottish situations? The models of cultural and political analysis provided by suffrage historians could be fruitfully gleaned and applied to the post-1918 period.

Clearly, suffrage history remains vibrant and well-deserving of its popularity for the ways it has complicated our notion of women’s activism, revealed how politics worked as a process, and deftly placed the struggle for the vote within wider frames. Of course, room remains for new scholarship that might look further at the imperial dimensions of women’s suffrage, the movement’s relationship to religion, and its role in the creation of Britain’s political cultures and sub-cultures. Suffrage history provides insights into political strategies and cultural politics, and can help educate readers in the nature of political life. Today’s national crises on both sides of the Atlantic make plain the need for a vigilant citizenry, well-tutored in their rights and obligations and astute to shifting political climates. Politicians responsible for budget stand-offs and government shutdowns might do well to review suffragists’ hard-won lessons in compromise, coalition-building, and face-to-face encounters with local constituencies, and even Occupy Wall Street protesters might benefit from a knowledge of the trials and tribulations of Britain’s suffrage activists.

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Short Biography

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Notes

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1 Although, highlighting the poll’s dubious methodology, both were far outstripped by singer Leona Lewis.


10 David Rubinstein, Sandra Holton and Martin Pugh have convincingly shown that the 1890s were a time of new strategies, more charismatic leaders, and closer cooperation among suffrage organizations: David Rubinstein, Before the Suffragettes: Women’s Emanicipation in the 1890s (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986); Martin Pugh, The March of Women: A Revisionist Analysis of the Campaign for Women’s Suffrage, 1866–1914 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), and Sandra Stanley Holton, ‘To Educate into Rebellion’.

11 This research augments Brian Harrison’s analysis of the Oxford circle of men who actively opposed the vote. Brian Harrison, Separate Spheres: The Opposition to Women’s Suffrage in Britain (London: Croom Helm, 1978).


See also Carmel Quinlan, *Genteel Revolutionaries: Anna and Thomas Haslam and the Irish Women’s Movement* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002).


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Margaret R. Higonnet and Patrice L.-R. Higonnet, ‘‘The Double Helix’’, in *Behind the Lines*, 31.


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