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Tanya Cheadle, *Sexual Progressives: Reimagining Intimacy in Scotland, 1880-1914*

(Series “Gender in History”).

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Reviewed by **Helena Goodwyn**

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In an April 1856 article published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Margaret Oliphant, the popular novelist and commentator, declared: “Woman’s rights will never grow into a popular agitation, yet woman’s wrongs are always picturesque and attractive” (1856: 379). Oliphant’s article, framed as a response to English educationalist and artist Barbara Leigh Smith’s (later Bodichon) 1854 pamphlet *Brief Summary of the Laws of England Concerning Women* (a key text in the eventual passage of the Married Women’s Property Act in 1882), is an eight-page defence of the status-quo in relation to marriage, and the associated property and financial rights of married women. Oliphant is at odds with Smith, whose arguments in *Concerning Women* are disparagingly minimised as “this brochure [...] one-sided and unequal” (387), despite their, by this time, already growing significance and popularity. Oliphant’s attitude will come as no surprise to readers of *VPFJ* who well know the prolific novelist for what Ann Heilmann and Valerie Sanders refer to as her “favourite” journalistic pose of “the superior, ironic wife” (Heilmann and Sanders 2006: 289-300).

Yet one particular opinion stands out in Oliphant’s otherwise conservative piece: her, perhaps surprising, conviction that in the event of marital breakdown, where there are children, neither parent should be given custody. Instead, the “poor little hapless waifs, astray and shelterless! – should be the children of the State” (Oliphant 1856: 383). Oliphant emphatically opines that if it really is the case that the law needs to be changed in relation to women’s rights

in marriage, “if progress and civilisation [...] make it needful to loose the absolute fixedness” of marriage bonds, then let it be done “absolutely.” Man and woman should part “as they met, solitary and single persons”. The “unhappy children, fatherless and motherless” must become, she avows again, “the children of the State”. This, the reader is told, is “*justice*” (384).

Radical thinking of this nature, and in relation to power dynamics between partners in romantic relationships and marriage, are the focus of Tanya Cheadle’s *Sexual Progressives: Reimagining Intimacy in Scotland, 1880-1914*. Through a series of detailed, insightful and engagingly written chapters that consider a range of nineteenth-century free thinkers via the methodology of “collective biography” (4), Cheadle demonstrates for the reader that *fin de siècle* Scotland was a place where alternative ideologies were forged, and hegemonic societal structures questioned. Cheadle’s book, whilst not explicitly considering popular fiction, provides us with many instances of how periodicals, ballads, political speeches, meetings (public and private), and networks of collaboration and influence interacted with the century’s dominant cultural format: the novel.

Mona Caird, the English novelist whose father and husband were both Scottish, features in a number of places in *Sexual Progressives*, not least because of her sudden rise to fame in 1888 after the publication of her provocative article “Marriage” in the *Westminster Review* (18). Caird’s best-known novel, *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894) is revealed to have been influential to Bella Pearce, the Glaswegian suffrage campaigner and active member of several Labour-focused political groups. Pearce is the subject of two chapters, and her column “Matrons and Maidens”, published under the pseudonym Lily Bell in Keir Hardie’s newspaper *Labour Leader* between 1894 and 1898, is discussed as an important cultural milestone, it being the first women’s column in a socialist newspaper (43). Cheadle takes on, and effectively debunks, previous scholarship that has brought into question Pearce’s authorship of the column, whilst also demonstrating that “Matrons and Maidens” was notable for its persistent feminist purpose in what was a male-dominated, and masculinist political movement.

Elsewhere, Bella and her husband Charles Pearce’s involvement in the Brotherhood of the New Life (an American ‘utopian’ religious experiment led by Thomas Lake Harris) is considered in the wider context of spiritualism and socialism’s many crossovers. Cheadle notes intersections between utopian idealism, various mysticisms and popular fiction writers such as Marie Corelli, Olive Schreiner, Sarah Grand, and lesser-known novelists such as Gertrude Dix, Jane Hume Clapperton and Isabella Ford. Bella Pearce’s attendance of the American writer Charlotte Perkins Stetson’s (later Gilman) lecture tour of Britain in 1896 is situated in wider discourses of evolutionary biology and New Woman rhetoric concerning what evolved sexual relations might one day look like.

Cheadle contrasts the Pearces’ Glasgow milieu and their feminist-inflected writings with Patrick Geddes, the social evolutionist, philanthropist and pioneering city planner, whose outputs were in keeping with the more scientific tone of Edinburgh’s progressive communities. Despite the very different circles in which the Pearces and Geddes published, both case studies remind us of the fluidity of transatlantic literary exchanges and influence during this period. In one example of this transatlantic connectivity Cheadle highlights Geddes’ friendship with Jane Addams, co-founder of Chicago’s Hull House, one of America’s most famous examples of a settlement house, and the influence of his *The Evolution of Sex* (1899) on Addams’ own writings.

The final figure given prominence in *Sexual Progressives* is Jane Hume Clapperton, whose career as a free thinker and reformer began in earnest once her parents were both deceased in 1873. She was, according to Cheadle and a number of her own Victorian contemporaries, one of the “era’s sexually radical voices” (158) and should be thought of as

such, alongside individuals such as Edward Carpenter and George Bernard Shaw. Clapperton's novel *Margaret Dunmore: Or, A Socialist home* (1888) is not the subject of Cheadle's analysis as this has been the sole focus of scholarly work on Clapperton thus far. Rather, this fascinating and sensitive account of Clapperton as a figure of bravely radical views, for which she was "cut" (168) by remaining members of her family, explores the writer's nonfiction, such as her journalistic pieces in the *Nineteenth Century* and her "major work" (164) *Scientific Meliorism and the Evolution of Happiness* (1885).

Sexual Progressives is an accomplished piece of scholarship that achieves what many monographs do not. It immerses the reader in a time and a place in such a way that it establishes a meaningful coherence to a number of wide-ranging, often conflicting and complex ideological debates concerning nothing less than the future of societal relations.

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