

Isabella Ford revisited: reflections on feminist biography, gender and labour history.

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In the late 1980s I wrote a biography of Isabella Ford, 1855-1924, a British socialist, suffragist and peace campaigner. She came from a wealthy middle-class Quaker family in Leeds and her parents were involved in radical liberal politics.(Hannam, 1989). In common with many feminist historians at the time I attempted to explore the life of one woman through the ‘web of friendship’ in which she was enmeshed and to avoid some of the pitfalls of ‘traditional’ biography writing – in particular the addition of yet another name to a list of ‘great women’. I was influenced by the debates at the time about biography writing, in particular the notion that it was impossible for the biographer to know everything about the lives of their subjects – that they could only provide fragments, glimpses of personality and some selected events. In the introduction to the book I claimed that I had not set out to explore Isabella Ford’s psychology as a way of explaining her actions and that I had avoided ‘undue speculation about her innermost thoughts and feelings’. I quoted from Bernard Crick’s biography of George Orwell that ‘none of us can enter into another person’s mind; to believe so is fiction. We can only know actual persons by observing their behaviour in a variety of different situations and through different perspectives’. (Crick, p.30). I therefore set out to examine the way in which Isabella Ford was influenced by, and tried to influence in turn, external events in her life. I was interested in the way in which she attempted to make connections between socialism, feminism, humanitarianism and peace, issues that were part of my own politics in the 70s and 80s. In common with many other ‘new life’ socialists in the 1890s Isabella Ford argued that personal lives and relationships were inextricably intertwined with politics. This is captured by her broad view of socialism which, as I argued in the book, would not have been out of place in the 1960s and 1970. It is captured in an obituary of her in the socialist newspaper, *New Leader*, 25 July 1924:

Isabella Ford’s conception of socialism was broad and human. She identified herself with every movement for freedom. She was international through and through, she loved animals scarcely less than human beings, she loved beauty and music, and sought a society in which all men and women would have an opportunity to develop into full human beings. She was, indeed, a citizen of tomorrow.

I found that a detailed study of one person’s political work and ideas revealed connections between movements and ideas that often seemed separate in mainstream histories. It made me think differently about both socialism and feminism in the pre war years and I became far more reluctant to draw rigid distinctions between different types of feminists and socialists. My attention was drawn to the ways in which contemporaries derived their ideas from varied and often surprising intellectual sources and I argued that the development and nature of their politics could best be understood in the context of the varied friendship networks in which they were enmeshed.

In the intervening years changes in the political landscape; the development of postmodernism and the challenges it posed to old feminist certainties about lived experience and the possibilities of a unified feminist politics based on solidarity between women; the new cultural history with its emphasis on discourse, language and representation and the greater attention to gender as a category of analysis have all influenced my subsequent work on women and politics and have led me to consider how I would write Isabella Ford's biography if I were to embark on it today.

A key period of re-thinking for me was when I wrote a book in the late 1990s with Karen Hunt on *Socialist Women. Britain, c 1880s-1920s* (2002) I built on many of the insights gained from working on Isabella Ford's biography, as well as my research on the Independent Labour Party (ILP), but took these in new directions. Firstly, in examining the activities of socialist women across different organisations I realised that I had been looking at the world through Isabella Ford's 'brand' of socialism and feminism i.e. her membership of the constitutionalist group, the NUWSS, her commitment to a limited suffrage and her membership of the ILP, a group committed to a parliamentary route to socialism. Karen's work had been on the more Marxist inspired Social Democratic Federation, an organisation that highlighted the importance of adult suffrage as a legitimate position for socialists who were also suffragists. In the book, therefore, we explored the variety of tactical positions taken on women's suffrage and considered how the debates over women's suffrage looked from the perspective of socialist women, many of whom identified themselves as woman-centred in their politics and in favour of women's suffrage and yet called for an adult rather than a limited franchise.

Secondly, we looked at the considerable differences between socialist women in the extent to which, and how, they looked at their politics through the prism of gender. In the biography of Isabella Ford I had been concerned to locate her within a group of women who put their greatest emphasis on the suffrage campaign – I would now also consider her close relationship with women such as Katherine Bruce Glasier who had different priorities. In examining the political choices made by women who were engaged in mixed-sex, male dominated political parties, historians in the 1970s and 80s focused on the tensions between sex and class. By the time that we came to write *Socialist Women* there was a growing emphasis on exploring the complex ways in which women developed a political identity/ identities. A new language was available in which to frame this analysis which could then give a different meaning to the interpretations put forward. Thus, texts are now likely to refer to 'fractured', 'multiple' and 'shifting' identities and to consider how women 'negotiated a political identity' or were at the 'borders of conflicting or different identities'. In *Socialist Women* we also looked at the different journeys that women had made over a lifetime in the development of their politics: Indeed the notion of a journey was raised by contemporaries. Helen Gault, a member of the ILP in the 1920s, drew attention to gender differences as well when she argued that 'when, as we must profoundly hope, men and women comrades arrive at the same conclusions, we shall have arrived at agreement by different routes. For the journeying –no less than the end of the journey- is important'. (*New Leader*, 5 September 1930)

Although in my biography I was conscious of the complexities of Isabella Ford's political choices the analysis was still framed by a focus on the tensions between sex and class. I would re-visit this now with a more nuanced view of her political journey

and, as Black and Brooke suggest, to see ‘diversity, complications and at points pliability’ in the ways in which women engaged with labour and socialist politics. (Black and Brooke, 1997, p.430) In *Socialist Women* we were concerned to look at the ways in which socialism was gendered- for example it was masculine in the language used and in the ways in which it attempted to ‘make socialists’ as well as in its priorities and concerns. Rather than examining women’s contribution to the socialist project, we also explored how socialist feminists tried to create, in their theory and practice, a woman-focused socialism. In the biography of Isabella Ford I examined how she tried to theorise the relationship between feminism and socialism but I did not locate her within a broader agenda of a woman-focused socialism. If writing the biography again I would be interested to explore her understanding of the ‘masculine nature’ of socialism- at one point, for example, she notes that in France ‘it is the use of that unfortunate masculine word, “fraternity” which excludes women. Women are evidently not brothers. English socialists must, therefore, find a new word which will include us’.(*Labour Leader*, 2 November 1906 –article on Jeanne Deroin) I would look at the space that she had to express her views, whether in the socialist press or on the public platform and would ask whether she had a different space (and expressed different views) within the women’s movement. Also, were her novels the only places in which she could explore relationships between the sexes within marriage and the family?

Two recent influences on my approach to researching women and politics would lead to significant changes in the writing of Isabella Ford’s biography. Firstly, cultural history has drawn my attention to how women told and re-told their own stories, and why they told them in that way, and the extent to which this can provide new insights into the process of politicisation. Indeed, while I discussed the various influences on Isabella Ford’s decision to become a suffragist and a socialist –including her early family life, her parents involvement in radical liberal causes and her experience of helping to organise women on strike – I did not explicitly discuss politicisation as a gendered process. I noted the different ways that Isabella explained her interest in socialist and feminist politics, and I also noted the ways in which others viewed her work as a propagandist, but I did not consider in a systematic way how she had represented her life and been represented by others, and indeed how this had affected her engagement with politics.

In explaining their engagement in socialist politics middle-class women faced disapproval from their own class on two counts: their public activities and the subversive nature of their politics. They also had to negotiate a role in a predominantly working-class movement where men viewed them either with suspicion or else idealised them. Middle-class women, therefore, used the idea of service to others who were less fortunate than themselves as an acceptable discourse to explain their involvement in socialist politics since this was compatible with contemporary definitions of appropriate male and female behaviour. Women were not, however, necessarily constrained by such views. Susan Grogan’s biography of the French socialist and feminist Flora Tristan, for instance, argues that Tristan used different representations of herself, e.g. as mother of workers or as a ‘saving woman’ with spiritual overtones, in order to empower her, and to legitimise her propaganda activities.(Grogan, 1998)

Isabella Ford did not write an autobiography but she did tell a story of her life through interviews in the press and through short contributions to collections of essays where prominent activists explained 'Why I became a Socialist'. Isabella told a fairly consistent story- repeated at various times in her life – that emphasised her long standing commitment to do something for those who were suffering from poverty. She recalled that as a young child she was asked during the Lancashire cotton famine, 'what is an operative, baby' at which she replied 'a starving creature'. At the age of 12 she made a pact with a friend to dedicate her life to 'improving the state of the world'. Her own account then formed a basis from which others could look at her life and work. Her close friend Ben Turner, a leader of the Yorkshire Textile Workers' Union in the 1890s and later an MP, wrote that 'no flattery is needed in speaking of the good work done by the Ford family. All that Miss Isabella has done has been done through a sincere desire to benefit the workers...' (*Yorkshire Factory Times*, 1 November 1889). In discussing her work for others, however, contemporaries used images of strength – it was claimed, for example, that she marched through the streets with striking textile workers 'like a new Joan of Arc'.

Isabella's own narrative was not just framed by a discourse of 'service to others'. She also emphasised the political influence of her mother, Hannah, and her own experience of the difficult lives of female mill workers in shaping her commitment to socialism. When asked why she began to take an interest in working girls she answered 'I don't know. Some people are born that way. My mother was quite a revolutionist, a great admirer of Cossuth...' (*Leeds Weekly Citizen* 12 June 1914). Hannah subscribed to the *Women's Union Journal* and the *Beehive*, both avidly read by Isabella who claimed that 'in that paper [*Beehive*] I saw that notice was taken of working women's industrial lives. In those days nothing was heard about women's wages in the papers!' (*Labour Leader*, 1 May 1913). Isabella's parents established a night school for mill girls where Isabella taught with her two sisters Emily and Bessie. Emily later claimed that this 'constant intimacy with girls of our own age, but brought up in such different circumstances, has been an enormous help in life to us towards understanding others so differently placed and endearing them deeply to ourselves...we sometimes visited the girls at their work or in their homes and so became intimate with their manner of life, and all this helped as a training for her in her later social work'. (E.S. Ford, 'I.O.Ford, Ford Family Papers) There was a complex relationship, therefore, between the ways in which life stories were framed, contemporary discourses and lived experiences which would need to be analysed and understood.

Recent discussions of autobiography/ and biography have explored the complex relationship between a sense of self and involvement in a collective movement. Most studies have focused on suffrage campaigners – Polkey, for instance suggests that women were self conscious in 'writing to history' because they wanted to shed light on women's participation in the public sphere. She argued that in telling their own story they were telling the story of others and that the development of their individual political consciousness was viewed as contingent on women's collective political consciousness. (Polkey, 2000) Socialist women on the other hand not only placed their lives within the experiences of other women, but were also likely to show how their lives were intertwined with the history of the labour movement. Margaret Bondfield, for instance, the first woman cabinet minister, claimed that it was difficult to separate 'my personal adventure from the history of the Labour Party...I have been so

identified with the movement that it is not always possible to say where one ends and the other begins'. (Bondfield, 1948, preface) A key feature of socialist ideology was to emphasise the collective good above selfish individualism, but this did not mean that socialist women did not gain personal self fulfilment and emotional satisfaction from their politics. For Isabella Ford it was not just 'the suffering of others' that motivated her to join the socialist group, the Independent Labour Party, but also because she thought that women, including herself, should be able to have a fulfilling public life. 'Gradually I became aware of a stirring and lifting of the gloom. A possibility, perhaps even a probability, seemed growing that women and men should stand together as equals, in the industrial world, and even in the political world'. (Ford, 1896)

A second key influence on my work has been the insights gained from psycho-social studies about the importance of 'reincorporating emotionsinto research on politics and protest'. In a recent collection of essays Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta argue that too often academic observers portray human beings as rational and instrumental in their political views and actions and 'ignore the swirl of passions all around them in political life'. (Goodwin et al, 2001, p.1) They suggest that it is crucial to examine emotions in relation to social and political life since gender roles in social movements are laden with emotional expectations. This has led me to take an interest in what politics meant for women, the extent to which emotions were crucial in attracting them to political movements and in sustaining their commitment, and to consider how they coped with the stress and strain of political activism in their day to day lives.

My biography of Isabella Ford is full of references to the emotional dimension of her politics but this is never analysed or theorised in any explicit way. She clearly found speaking difficult – she referred to 'trembling' at her first meeting, and at another hoped to refer to a suffrage letter in the press 'if I don't get so terrified (as I generally do) as to forget anything but Mrs Byles and Mrs Connon's faces gazing at me' (Letter to Millicent Fawcett c1898-9, Manchester central library). She felt so deeply about both women's suffrage and socialism that she was overjoyed when the two started to come together in 1913. Labour meetings were 'so splendid that I feel comradeship, the real thing, is growing fast...I feel like bursting with joy over it at times'. (Letter to Edward carpenter, 25 August 1913) Her politics, therefore, were sustained and enriched by an emotional engagement that could be either full of joy at the prospect of a different world or anger against injustices that she saw all around her.

Such emotions were deeply felt –thus her politics were not based simply on theory (although she did attempt to theorise the relationship between women's emancipation and socialism in her writings) but also on her understanding of material deprivation and how this was linked to thoughts and feelings. This can be seen in a story she told to a reporter about girls who were on strike: 'I have never felt absolute hunger...but these girls did...one poor girl with a drunken father and an invalid sister collected 10s and ran away with it. To her it represented wealth, and I was only sorry there was not more in the box. She had awakened to the right to possess something'. (*Leeds Weekly Citizen* 12 June 1914). In giving help during the dispute she found that the girls were 'desperate with hunger' and therefore she helped to serve 'a breakfast of tea and bread and butter every morning' as well as addressing meetings. She appeared to want to share their physical difficulties since she walked with them along the streets 'through sleet and snow...often taking insults from the crowds...' Such accounts also draw our

attention to the meaning of politics in women's everyday lives – what kind of activities did they engage in; how did they deal with emotional issues such as personal abuse or with physical difficulties, such as ill health brought on by constant speaking in poor weather conditions. What kind of practical support did they receive from home? While I explored the links between the personal and political among 'new life' socialists of the 1890s in the biography, I again did not systematically look at how politics informed everyday life or indeed how the latter informed politics.

Emotions or affective relationships tend to be linked to family life, and familial imagery has long been deployed, both by contemporaries and by historians, in other contexts and for different purposes outside the family. (Davidoff et al, 1999) In revisiting Isabella Ford's life I would look more closely at her status as a single woman and how this shaped her own political activism as well as the ways in which she was perceived by others. For instance Ben Turner described her as a 'sister' to Yorkshire's working women. At a time when marriage and children were thought to be a key source of emotional satisfaction for women it was assumed both by socialist women and by other commentators that their commitment to politics was a substitute for this. Writing about the Labour Party's chief woman officer, Marion Phillips, Ellen Wilkinson noted that she 'poured into the socialist movement the creative energy which other women have given to husband and children' while Margaret Bondfield, writing of her life as a trade union organiser claimed that she 'lived for the union...undisturbed by love affairs'. Such comments were so common that Brian Harrison had concluded that single women activists were 'married to the Labour Party'. (Harrison, 1987). And yet Isabella Ford's life would suggest that it was more complex than this. She gained both emotional and practical support from her sister Bessie, who was also single. Bessie looked after the running of the household while Isabella was away on speaking tours, but also shared her commitment to socialist politics. When she died Isabella wrote sadly that 'a piece of myself is gone...I keep thinking "I will ask Bessie" or "I will show her this"'. (Letter to Edward Carpenter 2 August 1919). Moreover, Isabella appeared to have made a positive choice not to marry –both she and her sisters discussed the constraints of marriage in novels and plays that they wrote in the 1890s- and therefore politics was not a substitute for an unfulfilled emotional life. Indeed, Isabella had many close friendships with men and women and her home, Adel Grange, was always teeming with life. When she moved to a cottage at the end of her life she claimed that life there was 'pure enjoyment to us- we delighted in having such nice people here and those who weren't nice are an endless source of amusement to us. It has been such a nice life for us...' (Letter to Millicent, Agnes and Phillippa Fawcett, 21 December 1921)

Conclusion

In revisiting Isabella Ford's biography today I would challenge the statement that I made in the introduction to the book that I should avoid examining her 'innermost thoughts and feelings'. Instead, I would now see it as crucial to explore the importance of emotions in her political life and would seek to understand these through a close reading of a range of personal material, including letters, interviews and fiction. This would require not just a textual analysis but an understanding of feelings and unconscious elements and their relationship to lived experience. As Michael Roper suggests in a stimulating article on subjectivity and emotion in gender history, 'what goes missing from linguistic analyses is an adequate sense of the

material: of the practices of everyday life; of human experience formed through emotional relationships with others; and of that experience as involving a perpetual process of managing emotional impulses, both conscious and unconscious, within the self and in relation to others'. (Roper, 2005, p.62)

If we are to understand these complex processes then biographical studies are a good place to begin. They can help us to 're-configure' a familiar story and provide insights into the complex ways in which women negotiated mixed sex politics. Although the assumption that there was a straightforward link between experience and political activity has been questioned, Karen Hunt and I argued in our book that individuals were not just passive 'carriers of cultural messages and discourses' but also took an active part in helping to shape the society in which they lived. Women's involvement in politics was constrained by the historical context in which they operated, including contemporary definitions of appropriate gender roles, but they were also able to contest these definitions and to look towards a new society that would be based on different gender relationships. Socialist women such as Isabella Ford may have had to negotiate different political identities over time, often having to make choices about priorities and political allegiances, but their awareness of belonging to a movement that sought change in the lives of the working class and of women meant that they were also motivated by wider collective loyalties that remained consistent throughout their lives. Moreover, the issues that they grappled with are still relevant to politics today.

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