
Elizabeth Crawford wonders ‘if the days were not longer in the 19th century’, and it is not difficult to see why in this impressively researched exposition of the achievements of the Garrett sisters and their friends and associates. *Enterprising Women* explores the social, cultural and political opportunities exploited by these women in the second half of the nineteenth century, a period in which the role of the accomplished male ‘professional’ achieved new prominence in a developing meritocracy, but in which the position of the middle-class woman was, Crawford notes, ‘particularly amorphous’.

The book focuses primarily on the careers of Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, her sisters Agnes Garrett and Millicent Garrett Fawcett, their cousin Rhoda Garrett, Elizabeth’s friend Emily Davies, and a later member of their circle, Fanny Wilkinson. In charting the careers of these women, Crawford emphasises the pioneering nature of their work in ‘facilitating women’s social advancement along the paths carved out by men’. She also stresses the importance of the network of friends and associates they developed in assisting them to overcome the prejudices and assumptions which conspired to thwart their progress in their chosen fields of work. ‘Fellowship is life’, says Morris’s John Ball, and fellowship was certainly crucial to the success of these women as they confronted an establishment whose intransigence was at times breathtaking.
Crawford’s scholarship is admirable and *Enterprising Women* offers increasingly compelling reading. The first chapter is rather dense with biographical material relating primarily to the Garrett family of Aldeburgh, part of the ascendant middle-class whose roots were in trade. More interestingly, it describes Elizabeth Garrett’s introduction to the women who founded *The English Woman’s Journal* and the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women—a group which included Barbara Bodichon, Bessie Rayner Parkes and Jessie Boucherett. Crawford structures subsequent chapters thematically, identifying the contributions made by the female members of the Garrett circle to the fields of medicine, education, interior design, horticulture and women’s suffrage. She concludes by viewing the achievements of these women within their wider cultural context, providing a useful account of the developments in nineteenth-century journalism that enabled them to promote their ideas and activities to an increasingly wide audience.

Elizabeth Garrett—later Garrett Anderson—is a unifying presence throughout the book, a reflection of both the range of her activities and the extent of her influence within this circle of ambitious women and beyond. The energy and determination with which she pursued her desire to become a doctor resonates through the second chapter. Crawford charts her progress from the medical student who had to scour the country to find suitable tuition, to the confident and impeccably professional doctor who founded the New Hospital for Women and helped to establish the London School of Medicine for Women. Faced with obstructions that were based as much on economic interests as ideological dogma, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson succeeded in establishing an extensive and renowned medical practice which assisted numerous other aspiring female doctors to develop their own clinical skills.

The chapters on Education and Citizenship are fascinating as much for their revelation of the divisions within the ‘women’s movement’ as for the perseverance and determination of individuals such as Emily Davies and Millicent Garrett Fawcett. Crawford reveals how Emily Davies differed significantly in her beliefs and aspirations in founding Girton College, Cambridge, from those who established Newnham College—although both colleges were united in their pursuit of a full university education for women. Similarly, the splits Crawford illuminates in the developing women’s suffrage movement are as important as they are surprising. It is easy in the twenty-first century to interpret such movements as presenting a united front against a common enemy. Instead, the description of the gradualist versus revolutionary factions that pursued the vote for women will raise a rueful smile for those familiar with Morris’s socialist career.

Morris receives a brief mention on several occasions in the chapter on ‘The Home’, though never very satisfactorily. In exploring the social and political motivations underlying Rhoda and Agnes Garrett’s successful interior decoration firm, Crawford claims, ‘As William Morris was the decorator of socialism, so the firm of R & A Garrett was to be that of liberalism’. I remain baffled as to what a ‘decorator of socialism’ might be. But although direct references to Morris are generally vague and unhelpful, the innovation and creativity of the Garrett cousins in developing a concept of the home as both useful and beautiful space does offer interesting parallels with the work of Morris and Co. Furthermore, Rhoda Garrett
sat on the General Committee of the SPAB, and must therefore have had some direct contact with Morris; although no account is given in this book of their ‘sharing notes’, it is interesting to speculate on possible discussions.

Fanny Wilkinson has left the most visual legacy of the Garrett circle in her work for the Kyrle Society and the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association. As the first professional female landscape gardener in England and, later, the first female Principal of Swanley Horticultural College, she transformed traditional notions of the relationship between women and the land. ‘Domestic gardening had long been considered a womanly pursuit’, says Crawford, ‘running a business involving design, hard landscaping, dealing with suppliers, supervising the work of male gardeners, and keeping abreast with the accounts was not.’ In an interview Fanny Wilkinson gave in 1890, the interviewer described her as ‘extremely nice looking’ with ‘a bright sunny face, which though a little tanned by exposure to the open air, has the fresh appearance of both good health and contentment’. It is a description we might readily associate with Morris’s Ellen in News from Nowhere, ‘light-haired and grey-eyed, but with her face and hands and bare feet tanned quite brown with the sun’, herself a lover of the outdoor life, ‘the earth, and the seasons, and weather, and all things that deal with it, and all that grows out of it’.

It is difficult in the space of a brief review to do justice to the scope and implications of Enterprising Women. One of its main strengths is its exposition of the vital inter-relations between the different movements dedicated to the advancement of intelligent, talented and determined women in the second half of the nineteenth century. It can appear clichéd in our century to talk of commitment, perseverance, and single-mindedness, and Crawford admits that ‘The work ethic is not an obvious basis for popular biography in the 21st century’. But whilst it is easy to scoff at the optimistic and motivational nature of the type of exhortations we associate with Samuel Smiles’s Self Help, Enterprising Women emphasises the importance of such personal application and confidence for the women who established themselves as the prominent female professionals of this period and who facilitated the progress of those who followed. For, as Crawford emphasises, ‘At a time when society had become more uncertain as to where women, particularly unmarried women, were to be located in the social structure women with determination and self-belief were able to make of themselves what they wished’.

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