

Marie Corbett (1859 – 1932)

A Brief Introduction.

The Victorians lived in a highly ordered society and one of individual morality. The elite were in total control of society and politics. On the horizon new values were developing and becoming apparent with the belief if they work hard enough, all men can become wealthy. However, this ideal did not reflect the lives of the lower classes. The dark shadow of the workhouse loomed over the blameless poor and the destitute.

Victorian woman had few rights and little say in politics. Their place was very much in the home unless they were extremely wealthy and brave enough to break down barriers that restricted their equal freedom. One extraordinary woman did just that, using her wealthy status, her educated mind and her vision of philanthropy.

Marie Corbett was a Victorian woman who wanted and fought for what she believed in. She lived her life in an era when the movement for women's liberation was at its most prevalent

Marie Corbett (1859 – 1932)

Early Life and Education.

Marie Corbett née Gray was born in Kennington, South London on 30th April 1859, the eldest of three daughters to George and Eliza Gray from Tunbridge Wells, Kent. Her father was an influential and pioneering entrepreneur making his fortune co-founding *Clarnico*, a significant and enterprising confectionery manufacturing company. He was solely responsible for introducing Spanish fruits, Greek raisins and currants into the British market.

Like so many well-to-do middle class Victorians, the young Marie Gray was privately educated at home. Four elderly women, who were strictly conventional, believing strongly in class distinctions, taught Marie.

Victorian society did not fully recognise the existence of the lower class. The ‘poor’ were simply invisible. The prevailing attitude believed the poor deserved the way they lived. The suggestion of lower classes being of the same flesh and blood was perceived as pure nonsense. Marie reacted strongly against this false perception and soon developed an exceptionally tenacious and determined character.

Political activism was very much a part of Marie Gray’s life from an early age. Her parents were staunchly liberal and extremely progressive becoming the driving force behind Marie’s fierce sense of obligation she had for those less fortunate than herself, particularly children.

The Liberals, at that time, were a political party who favoured social reform and personal liberty. In their view, the poverty, squalor and ignorance in which people lived made it impossible for freedom and individuality to flourish.

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Personal History.

In 1880 Marie married Charles Henry Corbett. Both were supportive and devoted to each other for fifty years, each sharing the other's progressive outlook. Marie was a member of the Women's Liberal Federation (WLF) in which Charles strongly supported as well as votes for women. Charles had previously studied law and became a barrister, giving up the bar due to the death of his father in 1882; when he then went on to oversee the management of his family's twelve London properties.

Charles and Marie moved to a large country house called Woodgate in Danehill, Sussex in 1882. Charles' father had bought the property in 1870 and used it as a shooting lodge. It was there, set in 840 acres of agricultural fields and woodlands in the Sussex Weald that Charles and Marie raised their three children, their first born Margery in 1882, Adrian 1883 and Cicely 1885.

The children were educated at home and unfashionable as it was at that time, Marie and Charles made sure their children would share every advantage equally from love and affection to the best possible education. Marie taught scripture and music whilst Charles took two days a week off from his office to teach history, geography, mathematics and Latin. Governesses were employed to teach the children French and German. With this fortunate upbringing all three of the children went on to read at university.

The Woodgate family home was renowned for its social functions, hosting balls and weekend parties. The Corbett's hospitality was famous in the best English traditions. Though they could easily afford comfort, neither Marie or Charles were interested in luxuries. The Corbett's were interested in people not possessions and they both held a deep concern for social and moral welfare and reform.

Marie Corbett (1859 – 1932)

Achievements.

“I walked with the humane and conscientious gentleman whose duty it was to take that walk, that Sunday morning, through the little world of poverty enclosed within the workhouse walls. It was inhabited by a population of some fifteen hundred or two thousand paupers, ranging from the infant newly born or not yet come into the pauper world to the old man dying on his bed.”

George Eliot, Account of Village Workhouse 1830.

For many years, Marie and Charles put their social conscience into action for those living on and near the family’s land. Tenants and locals from miles around frequently came to the family home for advice. As a magistrate and trained barrister, Charles provided free legal support, while Marie always dealt with personal matters.

Marie was an energetic woman, an ardent feminist and a liberal. She was a woman with immense drive, active in local affairs, local government and all deserving causes. She was a suffragist, supporting votes for women and campaigned tirelessly for her husband who eventually, in the 1906 General Election Liberal landslide, won the parliamentary seat for East Grinstead.

Politically, Danehill and East Grinstead were both highly conservative areas. Marie’s purposeful views and campaigns directed towards votes for women combined with her political activities, were often met with hostility from the disapproving crowds that she soon drew. Marie and Charles were frequently regarded as traitors to their class. In addition, Marie was considered as an unusual figure among the prim and proper of Victorian society. She was often seen striding around dressed in a pair of riding breeches of her own design or exercising the new liberty of cycling, shockingly revealing inches of her ankles! Victorian fashion was not intended to be utilitarian. Marie Corbett’s practical approach to clothing was groundbreaking and coincided with the growing power and social status of women.

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Achievements continued.

This can be seen as Marie Corbett's initial drive to break boundaries and go against the status quo. It is hard to compare a present day British woman to Marie in terms of the groundbreaking issues she was fighting and voicing against in her time.

Charles Corbett employed men to work the land of the Woodgate family property. He built several cottages for the animal husbandry workers and their families.

Unfortunately when a man was too old and incapable of work, he and his wife were demoted and reduced to enter the workhouse. Marie would often travel the 9 miles in her pony and trap to the Uckfield workhouse visiting the downtrodden men and women. What Marie witnessed would lead to her greatest political and humane achievements. She was horrified and appalled to discover the awful conditions people were kept in, particularly the impoverished children.

Victorian Britain was an era of rapid industrial growth with agriculture being pushed aside. The unprecedented rate at which the population was rising led to people both skilled and unskilled flocking into towns and cities in search of employment. This directly influenced housing shortages, slums, overcrowding, destitution and homeless children. By the end of the 1880's, 80% of England's population lived in cities with one third living in poverty.

In the nineteenth century, no official support system was available for those who were unemployed, elderly, sick or disabled. Government agreed help should be provided, and so the Poor Law Amendment Act also known as the New Poor Law was passed. Parishes were grouped together into Unions and The Union Workhouse was adapted in 1834 as a genius solution to the spiralling poverty, thus creating a place for the impoverished and destitute to live and work.

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Achievements continued.

The Conservative Government was terrified of encouraging ‘idlers’ and made sure people feared the workhouse. The idea was to humiliate the desolate and oppressed for asking for help, to shame them into standing on their own two feet. Those that had no choice but to enter the workhouse were tainted with the stigma of failure. Conditions in the workhouses were deliberately basic to act as a deterrent. Only the most desperate and poverty stricken people turned to the workhouses as a last resort.

Once admitted to the workhouses people were known as ‘inmates’ and would be categorised according to their status. Men, women and children were segregated; families were separated never to be reunited. Many children were born into workhouse life, as unmarried mothers were cast from an unforgiving society and forced to seek shelter. Other unfortunate children were abandoned and orphaned.

“The Society for the prevention of cruelty to animals was created in 1824. Which was 67 years before the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, which was created in 1891”

Victorian Children - A Comprehensive Victorian Children History Guide.
(www.victorianchildren.org)

During her visits, Marie saw the deprived children mixed together in wards with lame and withered women, many of who were mentally handicapped. She became determined not only to work on behalf of the friendless, impoverished children, but to set out and reform the conditions of the workhouses themselves.

The 1894 Local Government Act altered the political system enabling Marie to join as a rural district council member, after which, members could become Poor Law Guardians for their areas. Marie took advantage of this and stood for election as a Poor Law Guardian and was appointed to Uckfield Union Board of Guardians the very same year. Marie was one of the first women in the country to be a Rural District Councillor and a Guardian standing for an extraordinary 36 years.

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Achievements continued.

The 1918 Representation of the People Act enfranchised women over the age of 30 including married women to members of the local register. The women's vote was partially won and from then on, as a member of the Ashdown Forest Boarding Out Committee, Marie devoted all her time to another other great cause; helping workhouse children. She visited the workhouse each week and began to undertake a tremendous amount of humanitarian and welfare work. Focusing first on Uckfield, she set about finding people in the community who were willing to open their homes and foster children.

Marie went on to help children in the neighbouring parish of Eastbourne. Eastbourne Union workhouse had a reputation for harsh and callous treatment. At a meeting of the Board of Guardians one of the members complained...

“There is no want of severity here in treatment. During the very awful weather we had in the winter the casuals were given cold water and bread. It is cruelty and worse than cruelty”.

Discipline was strictly enforced for minor offences such as swearing or feigning illness; inmates were commonly introduced to a starvation diet for up to 48 hours. Nine days after giving birth, single women were also subjected to the starvation diet. The diet was used as a deterrent against the use of the workhouse as a place to be confined. Within the confines of the workhouse was a 97-foot-deep well and it was whispered that unwanted babies were thrown down.

Life for children of the workhouse was a bleak and horrifying fact of life. In the overpowering stench of laundry steam, boiled vegetables and disinfectant soap, their days involved the never ending scrubbing of vast dormitories and intimidating, dreary corridors, the peeling and chopping of vegetables by the bushel (8 gallons/40 litres) and the mending of clothes. Surviving on a monotonous diet of bread, cheese and gruel for breakfast and served the most basic rations such as pickled meats and potatoes for dinner, there was no time or energy for play for the pauper children.

Workhouses were notorious for the recurring problem of segregating the sick from the healthy following frequent outbreaks of minor, chronic or infectious diseases.

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Achievements continued.

The children were often infested with head and body lice. It was an auspicious duty to shave the heads of children with head lice. A member of staff noted that she “Remembered one little girl whose earlobes were stuck to her scalp by ‘nests’ of nits” Those of ill health were cared for by female paupers acting as nurses, but were more often cured by death. Life in the workhouse was a misery beyond description.

Marie had soon placed every eligible young child in a suitable home. At her peak, Marie had 40 children to visit every month with 100 under her care. Every child was paid for. 5 shillings per week went to the foster family for their keep. Marie received their school reports and took the children to the dentist. Her care and interest for her family of orphans was unprecedented. Marie had no patience with officialdom when it hindered the children’s welfare. A government inspector checking the foster homes for suitability said, “She didn’t approve of one woman because her cottage was too untidy”.

Marie answered...

***“If she smacks the child when it’s naughty and kisses it when it’s good,
it won’t matter about anything else”.***

With the workhouses finally empty of children, Marie had created a legacy of children whose lives had been transformed by the loving start they had been given from the families she had found for them.

Marie sadly died in 1932 at the age of 72.

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Researchers view

There has been so little written of Marie Corbett's life and her achievements unlike some of her counterparts, Millicent Fawcett, Louisa Twinning, Selina Cooper even her own daughter Dame Margery Corbett Ashby. Yet Marie did make an impact, influencing so many people she came into contact with and frequently turning lives from something broken into something new.

Being a woman in the 19th century meant for those that were born privileged, their lives were lived within the private sphere. Women were allotted a subsidiary role as a homemaker, a mother and devoted wife. Society expected patience, self-sacrifice and virginal innocence. Women were kept a safe distance from the influence of Government, the 'outstanding male individuals' arguing that a feminine presence would be productive only of disorder and interference with the business of the house. Even Queen Victoria, who on ascending the throne aged just 18 and a social and symbolical superior to every citizen in Britain wrote,

“The Queen is most anxious to enlist every one who can speak or write to join in checking this mad, wicked folly of ‘Woman's Rights’, with all its attendant horrors, on which her poor feeble sex is bent, forgetting every sense of womanly feeling and propriety... It is a subject which makes the Queen so furious that she cannot contain herself. God created men and women different - then let them remain each in their own position”.

Queen Victoria, letter 29 May 1870

The odds were stacked against Marie. She could have conformed to tradition. She didn't though. Marie had foresight and was not afraid to lead the way with new ideas and practices that had not yet gained mainstream acceptance.

During my research, I have come to find Marie as an illusive yet formidable woman, forthright and unfaltering in her quest for equality. A true visionary in her attitude to empower people.

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Researchers view

Through my research I was unable to find any sources that linked if not Marie, but her husband Charles Corbett to the 1908 Children's Act. I would have been interested to know if the work, which Marie had become involved in, would have had any influence on the act being passed by the Liberal government of which her husband was a member.

It would be imprudent of me not to emphasise the deep passion of Marie's political force.

Marie was radical yet non-militant regarding women's suffrage issues. Being one of three founding women, Marie helped to create the Liberal Woman's Suffrage Society in 1887. The following year, after the continuing failing support of women's suffrage legislation from the male leadership of the Liberal party, Marie became an active member of Millicent Fawcett's, National Union of Women's Suffrage Society in 1897. For many years Marie and her daughters Margery and Cicely made public speeches on the subject of women's rights. With her daughters in 1904, Marie travelled to Berlin to attend the formation of the International Women Suffrage Alliance, an organisation to press for equal suffrage and equal eligibility. Marie was a founder member and secretary of the East Grinstead's Woman's Soroptimist Society. The Soroptimist International of East Grinstead as it is known today is a global volunteer movement working to transform the lives of women and girls. Marie was instrumental in inspiring her children's lifelong, continuing interests in political and social progressions.

I am sure there is more to Marie and feel obliged to delve even deeper to provide the acknowledgement she truly deserves. Researching Marie was a huge challenge, for someone who was so influential in changing children's appalling lives she has not the recognition dully deserved. She has amazed me. I have struggled to find a present day British heroine that I could compare her to in order for you to relate to her achievements and life with.

Marie had used her education, wealth and status for the good of the poor. In conclusion this for me has been inspirational to research, learn and produce.

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