



Quelle

Cobbe, Frances Power: Introduction to “The Woman Question in Europe” (1884)¹

[Miss Frances Power Cobbe, daughter of Charles Cobbe, D.L., of New-bridge House, Co. Dublin, was born in 1822, and is the author of the following works: “An Essay on Intuitive Morals,” “Religious Duty,” “Broken Lights,” “Darwinism in Morals,” “The Hopes of the Human Race,” “The Duties of Women,” “The Peak in Darien,” etc. Of late Miss Cobbe has devoted herself almost exclusively to the work of the Victoria Street Society for the Protection of Animals from Vivisection, of which she is the foundress and Honorary Secretary.]

There have been many movements in the world—some of them recorded in history as portentous events, others forgotten within a few years of their occurrence—which may each be compared to a wave on the surface of the Mediterranean. From the insignificant ripple to the wavehigh billow flecked with foam and breaking in cataracts, they have arisen only to subside to their original level, leaving the boundaries of land and sea where they have stood for a thousand years. There are other movements, on the contrary, which resemble the tides of the Ocean, wherein each wave obeys one uniform impetus, and carries the waters onward and upward along the shore.

Of all the movements, political, social and religious, of past ages there is, I think, not one so unmistakably tidelike in its extension and the uniformity of its impulse, as that which has taken place within living memory among the women of almost every race on the globe. Other agitations, reforms and revolutions have pervaded and lifted up classes, tribes, nations, churches. But this movement has stirred an entire sex, even half the human race. Like the incoming tide, also, it has rolled in separate waves, and each one has obeyed the same law, and has done its part in carrying forward all the rest. The waves of the Higher Education of Women all over the world; the waves which lifted women over the sand-bars of the medical and (in America) of the legal and clerical professions; the waves which seated them on the School Boards and Boards of Guardians of the Poor; the wave which gave them the English Municipal Vote; the wave which restored to Married Women a right to their own property; every one of these waves, great and small, has been rolled forward by the same advancing tide.

But the crown and completion of the progress must be the attainment of the Political Franchise in every country wherein representative government prevails, and till that point be reached, there can be no final satisfaction in any thing which has been achieved. It has been repeated till it has become a commonplace, that “the Suffrage is the key of woman’s position.” Obtaining it, every privilege she can reasonably desire must follow. Failing to obtain it, nothing,—not even such installments of her rights as she has hitherto enjoyed,—is secure. An easily-raised storm of prejudice and selfishness, whether of trade or party or sect, passing over the masculine population, might sweep away her few privileges, while she remained helpless and unable to protect them by a single vote. On a small scale such confiscations of the rights of women in trades and other matters have occurred again and again. The sufferers had no appeal from injustice, and, because they were unrepresented, their wrongs were overlooked.

The most difficult problem in that great branch of Ethics which we call Politics regards the place which ought to be assigned under each constitutional government to alien races of men. The system of Representation itself, with Trial by Jury and the whole scheme of civil and political liberty, as we, in our day, understand it, has grown up through a thousand years of

¹ Cobbe, Frances Power: Introduction, in: Stanton, Theodore (ed.), *The Woman Question in Europe*. A Series of Original Essays. New York 1884, pp. xiii-xviii.

“Freedom slowly broadening down
From precedent to precedent,”

among our law-abiding Anglo-Saxon race; and either the hasty adoption of it by other nations with different tendencies and untrained to self-government, or else the sudden admission of aliens in large numbers to a share in the working of our own machinery, are experiments fraught with difficulty and danger. In the Greek, Italian, French and Spanish Chambers we see examples of the first; and, in the Irish Parliamentary “Obstruction” and misuse of the jury system to defeat justice, of the second. Noble and righteous as was the act by which the government of the United States extended the suffrage to the emancipated negroes, the perils of such a step, could scarcely have been encountered by any sane statesman had the lately freed slaves borne a much larger proportion to the whole white population of the Republic; and not even American democracy will contemplate for many a year to come following up this heroic act by enfranchising Chinese immigrants; nor English radicalism ask for the admission of Hindoos to a share in the Legislative,—scarcely even in the Executive,—government of India.

Statesmen, even of the broadest views, may not only be pardoned, but praised, for hesitating and taking time for deep consideration, when it is proposed to introduce a new element into the constitution of their country. In my humble judgment, as a Conservative, there has been culpable recklessness on the part of those who, to serve party interests, have, in England, thrown open the gates of our sacred “*polis*” to a rabble of “illiterates,” and in America have admitted hordes of immigrants to the ballot-box, before it was possible for them to acquaint themselves with American politics, or to imbibe American principles.

These considerations should induce women, and their generous advocates, to regard without impatience all opposition to their claims to the suffrage which they believe to be honestly intended and grounded on patriotic anxiety lest the introduction of a new force should disturb the working of the machine of State. They should teach them also to frame their arguments with the paramount object of allaying the fears and encouraging the confidence of such worthy opponents, who, when once convinced that the enfranchisement of women will tend to the stability and prosperity of the State, and to the maintenance of social order and religion, will become the most earnest advocates of the measure. The difference—nay, rather the contrast—should likewise be insisted on between proposals to admit the dregs of a population to the franchise, and those to admit the mothers, daughters and sisters of the men who already exercise it; and again, between proposals to admit aliens of another race, and those to admit women who have the same hereditary tendencies, attachments, creeds and interests; and who are the inevitable partakers of the nation’s prosperity, and the deepest sufferers by its disasters or misrule. In short, it ought to be the care of the advocates of women to point out that not a single one of the reasons for caution in the case of the admission of aliens affect their claims; while there exist a multitude of valid reasons, why, being by nature part of the nation, they should also be, by law, citizens of the State; bringing with them, not an element of weakness and disintegration, but a completer union, and a contribution to the nation’s, counsels of something more than “mother-wit,” even of mother-wisdom.

The man is not to be envied who can view the struggle of women for political rights with contempt or indifference. That those struggles may not always have been guided by infallible taste and wisdom, and that they have often been met—for lack of sensible argument—with silly derision, need not blind us to the fact that they constitute one of the bravest battles, one of the most pathetic movements, the world has ever seen. Other strifes have been carried on between rival races, rival classes, rival sects; but here we have only the patient, persistent appeal of daughters to fathers; of sisters to brothers; of wives to husbands; of the women, who make the charm of society, to the men who call them friends. There are no “garments rolled in blood” in the battle of these warriors. The combatants command neither cannon nor bayonets. They cannot even break down iron palings, like the populace of London, when the rights they demanded were withheld; or threaten dynamite and petroleum like Nihilists and Fenians. They have not the minutest political influence at

their disposal wherewith to coerce their opponents. Never was there a case of such pure and simple Moral Pressure,—of an appeal to justice, to reason, to men’s sense of what is due, and right, and expedient for all. When the time comes to look back on the slow, universal awakening of women all over the globe, on their gradual entrance into one privileged profession after another, on the attainment by them of rights of person and property, and, at last, on their admission to the full privileges of citizenship, it will be acknowledged that of all the “Decisive Battles of History,” this has been, to the moralist and philosopher, the most interesting; even as it will be (I cannot doubt) the one followed by the happiest Peace which the world has ever seen.

I feel myself honored in being called on to introduce a worthy and adequate record of this great contest to the public of England and America.

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Auf diese Quelle bezieht sich ein einführender und erläuternder Essay von Bosch, Mineke: “The Woman Question in Europe” in European History. Contribution to the web-feature „European history – gender history“. In: Themenportal Europäische Geschichte (2009), URL: <<http://www.europa.clio-online.de/2009/Article=418>>.