Cobbe, Frances Power (1822 - 1904)

1822-1904

Irish social worker and feminist

Born in Newbridge House, Donabate, she travelled in Italy and the East, and wrote *Cities of the Past* (1864) and *Italics* (1864). A strong theist, a supporter of women's rights, and a prominent antivivisectionist, she was associated with Mary Carpenter in the founding of "ragged" schools and published more than 30 works, mostly on social questions, including *The Duties of Women* (1881) and *The Scientific Spirit of the Age* (1888).

Summary Article: Cobbe, Frances Power
from *The Encyclopedia of Victorian Literature*

feminism
gender studies
journalism
newspaper and periodicals

Frances Power Cobbe was a pioneering feminist journalist, founder of the largest English antivivisection society, and among the best known feminist writers of her day. Writing for the press and social movements, her work used the genres of the established newspaper and periodical press – the article, the leader, the letter to the editor – to situate feminist discourse within dailyness and recurrence, creating new audiences for feminist ideas, and establishing feminism as an accepted frame of reference.

Frances Power Cobbe was a pioneering feminist journalist, founder of the largest English antivivisection society, and among the best known feminist writers of her day. She was involved in the national women's suffrage campaign, argued to improve women's educational and employment opportunities, and was a vocal critic of marriage. She was instrumental in the passage of the 1878 Matrimonial Causes Act, which made domestic violence grounds for legal separation. She also agitated on behalf of and helped to write the provisions for the 1876 Cruelty to Animals Act, which sought to limit the use of live animals in scientific research. Her work is now the subject of important critical attention as scholarly approaches to women's writing, which tended to focus on fiction and poetry and research on feminist journalism, which tended to approach it as a separate or marginalized formation, have broadened to include women's work in the established press. Cobbe's importance to Victorian feminism and women's writing in the period is indisputable. Writing for newspapers, periodical titles, and for social movements, her work used the genres of the established newspaper and periodical press – the article, the leader, the letter to the editor – to situate feminist discourse within dailyness and recurrence, creating new audiences for feminist ideas, and establishing feminism as an accepted frame of reference.

Born December 4, 1822 on the family estate at Newbridge, Ireland, Cobbe was the youngest of five children and the only daughter of Charles Cobbe, an Anglo-Irish landowner. Her autobiography, *Life of...*
Frances Power Cobbe, by Herself (1894), recounts a happy childhood, portraying warm relationships with an affectionate mother and brothers in spite of a distant father. By her own account, Cobbe’s interest in the serious study of religious questions was well-established by early adulthood, and she maintained a committed schedule of self-education. Her first publication, Essays on the Theory of Intuitive Morals (1855), examines Immanuel Kant’s moral philosophy and Cobbe’s own theistic beliefs.

After the death of her father in November 1857, Cobbe travelled extensively in Europe before moving to England where she was determined to make her own living. First involved with Mary Carpenter’s work for “ragged” children, Cobbe also became a workhouse visitor. Two of her earliest periodical publications, “Workhouse Sketches” (1861) for Macmillan’s Magazine and “Philosophy of the Poor Laws” (1864) for Fraser’s Magazine, examined these experiences. Returning to Europe in 1861, as Italy-based correspondent for the Daily News, Cobbe was introduced to the Welsh sculptor Mary Lloyd, who would become her lifelong partner. Her first articles on women’s position, “Celibacy versus Marriage” and “What Shall We Do with Our Old Maids?”, published in 1862, offered witty and forceful criticisms of heterosexual marriage and work opportunities for women, whilst praising women’s domestic lives with each other. The articles made her reputation as an essayist and brought her to the attention of the growing feminist movement organized around the activities of the Langham Place Circle.

Throughout the 1860s and 1870s, Cobbe was a highly social and energetic, if sometimes difficult, colleague in the feminist cause. Her friends included leading Victorian feminists such as Emily Davies, Lydia Becker, and Millicent Fawcett. Her writing on women’s suffrage, marriage law, domestic violence, and women’s education and employment, was a powerful vehicle for Victorian feminism. She wrote regularly in the leading periodicals, and was hired as leader writer for the London Echo (1868–75), the nation’s first halfpenny daily paper. As a periodical essayist, Cobbe was the only woman of her day to write regularly on women’s issues from a feminist perspective in the established press. She was also one of the first women employed by a newspaper as a regular staff member. Her autobiography rightfully highlights the importance of her journalism work. Addressing an audience of over one hundred thousand in the Echo, the largest circulation to date of an evening paper, Cobbe’s leader-writing is a milestone in Victorian feminism. Through her work as a journalist, Cobbe circulated feminist ideas beyond the feminist community, conveying to an everyday audience how differently the day’s news – a murder, a law suit, a divorce – reads through feminist lenses.

From around 1875, Cobbe's attention was increasingly drawn to antivivisection and the cause of animal welfare. Her first involvement came during her European travels when she became interested in local animal welfare concerns in Italy. There, animal welfare advocates had publicly exposed the routine vivisection of horses at the prestigious veterinary college in Alfort, France, and called for the abolition of such teaching demonstrations in England. Responding to that media exposure, Cobbe published her first animal welfare essay, “The Rights of Man and the Claims of Brutes” (1863) in Fraser’s Magazine. In 1875, after public outcry over a demonstration of animal experimentation at a meeting of the British Medical Association, Cobbe founded the Victoria Street Society for the Protection of Animals Liable to Vivisection (popularly called Victoria Street), writing over 320 books, articles, and pamphlets for the movement, and serving briefly as editor of its journal, the Zoophilist. She also successfully placed dozens of articles in established periodicals, such as “The Medical Profession and Its Morality” (Modern Review, 1881) and “Lord Lister and Painless Vivisection” (Manchester Guardian, 1898). She continued to write and speak regularly for the antivivisectionist cause until her death.

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In 1884, Cobbe retired with Lloyd to Dolgellau, near Barmouth in Wales, where Lloyd had a life interest in a family estate. In 1891, a large legacy from an antivivisectionist who admired Cobbe's advocacy work enabled them to move into the estate manor house, Hengwrt, from which Cobbe continued her advocacy at a slower rate, and composed her autobiography. She died in Hengwrt on April 5, 1904. Her will made provisions for her nieces and various single women, donated her books to establish a public library for Barmouth, and left the substantial portion of her estate to the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection.

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