
Borderline Citizens: **Women, Gender, and Political Culture in Britain, 1815–1867**

A new British Academy book provides the most comprehensive analysis to date of women's involvement in British political culture in the first half of the 19th century. In the following extracts, Dr Kathryn Gleadle describes how women often engaged with politics issues through a prominent male relative – in this case, the leading anti-slavery campaigner Thomas Foxwell Buxton.

IT WAS Priscilla Johnston, Anna Gurney, and to a lesser extent Sarah Buxton who were particularly implicated in Buxton's parliamentary endeavours. Prior to her marriage in 1834 to Andrew Johnston (an Evangelical MP who was also closely involved in Buxton's work) Priscilla acted as her father's chief assistant and secretary. After her wedding the role of Buxton's leading coadjutor was taken up for six months by Anna (his cousin), while Priscilla and Andrew spent time on their estate in Scotland. On their return to London in the

spring of 1835 both Andrew and Priscilla resumed their labours for Buxton, along with Anna, Buxton's sister Sarah, and to a lesser extent Buxton's other children, Richenda, Edward, and Charles.

Anna and Priscilla often laboured for twelve-hour days, sometimes to the detriment of their health. They undertook extensive research and composed synopses of documents to facilitate Thomas's political performances. The following request to Anna was typical: 'Will you oblige me by looking over the enclosed papers, & giving

me your opinion as to what I shall do? and telling me the substance of what is in them?' They were not merely playing an auxiliary role. His speeches, for example, were routinely composed by Anna or Priscilla. As Thomas reported to Anna in May 1838, 'Your speech [on abolition], as delivered at Exeter Hall yesterday was very good'. Or, as Priscilla wrote to Anna, 'My father spoke for an hour "out of Miss Gurney" he says'. Thomas Fowell Buxton's signature on reports and letters did not signify an autonomous, individual identity.

'Thomas Fowell Buxton' functioned almost as a 'brand name' that could be utilised by other family members. For example, Priscilla did not merely act as her father's amanuensis, she undertook correspondence in his name. She noted with amusement Thomas's confusion when William Lloyd Garrison, the American abolitionist, thanked him for a letter which he had sent to *The Liberator*. Thomas was unable to recall the letter as it was she who had written it. This appears to have been a common practice within the family. It was the cause which mattered, and individual identities were subordinated to it.

Priscilla and Anna's confidence in writing under Thomas's name (and his acquiescence in this process) suggests that it was perceived by the family not to signify simply his own individuality, but to be rather representative of a corporate political project. Just as the franchise might be regarded as a piece of family property, so too might the career of a politician be viewed as a channel for the furtherance of family political objectives. The Buxtons' assumption of a collective familial identity was integral to this process. As Priscilla put it, 'we are *all* doing good by wholesale'. The subtleties of this phenomenon may be discerned by exploring a particular instance of Buxton family collaboration: the composition of an extensive monograph on the slave trade, *The Remedy*.

Published in 1840 and bearing the authorial signature of 'Thomas Fowell Buxton', *The Remedy* was a sequel to *The African Slave Trade* (1839). The work insisted on the need to augment the British naval presence and for diplomatic initiatives to be undertaken with African chiefs to ensure the cessation of the slave trade. It was an audacious, expansionist vision of imperial rule which included extensive plans for agricultural and

commercial development. Although it represented a reversal of many strands of existing colonial policy, remarkably, many of its arguments were to be accepted.

Whilst Thomas appears to have been responsible for the general scheme of the work and an initial draft, Sarah Buxton and Anna Gurney were both closely involved in its composition. A letter to them from Thomas finds him very pleased with the sections they have sent and especially that on cruelty: 'what an argument it is for Missionaries'. It was Priscilla, however, who bore the brunt of the work. In the winter of 1839 she wearily explained to her sister Richenda that she had been working 'night & day' on the publication, going through the proofs and making extensive alterations so as to render it more accessible. Although she felt a responsibility to adhere to the substance of her father's plans for the work, Priscilla clearly felt she had the authority to substantially rewrite much of it, confessing: 'my only fear & doubt is whether my father & you all knowing it so well, will not feel it strange'.

The authorial signature of 'Thomas Fowell Buxton' thus silenced the fact that this was a work with an intricate history of collaborative composition. This does not mean to say that it was a process devoid of conflict. Thomas charged Priscilla with finishing the work when he was in Italy unwell, yet he found it difficult to relinquish control. He acknowledged that Priscilla's revisions, which had overturned 'the whole existing arrangement of my book', had greatly improved it – although characteristically he claimed he too would have made similar changes. Priscilla wrote to Anna in desperation at her father's refusal to resign command of the project. Her father mocked her anxiety, writing to Edward that she should 'trot along a little

more soberly'. Priscilla's frustration is understandable. Whilst her father reassured her that she should not have paid any attention to his 'nonsensical' suggestions for alteration, he nonetheless requested that his 'brilliant' passage on racial prejudice be reinstated. Her faith in providential destiny provided her with a means of justifying her exasperation. Observing that her father was duty-bound to be in Rome because of her mother's health, she noted: 'I feel for myself the truest faith that all this mighty work is under the closest care of Providence – it seems to me that we are bound to trust the *Master & Doer*. If servants are dismissed for a time (which I firmly believe my Father is providentially) they must bear to be passive – such is the required service.'

The family's firm belief in providential destiny helped to abate somewhat the emotional demands of working with the often imperious Thomas. He could be considered not as a dominant political agent for whom they offered services – but rather as another humble servant working in God's name. Even so, Thomas's gendered self-positioning as paterfamilias was interwoven into the family's identity as a collective political unit.

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The Anti-Slavery Society Convention, 1840, by Benjamin Robert Haydon, oil on canvas, 1841. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

WHEN THE painter Benjamin Haydon executed his ambitious study of the world anti-slavery convention which met in London 1840, he was at pains to include women in his portrayal. However, they were situated as – literally – borderline figures. The dramatic centrepiece of the work focused upon the veteran campaigner, Thomas Clarkson, who is surrounded by a host of male anti-slavery crusaders. Women are positioned around the edges of the great painting. Whilst some famous female activists are clearly visible, such as Anne Knight and Elizabeth Pease, the woman who was given the greatest prominence in the work, just to the left of Thomas Clarkson, was Mary Clarkson. Tellingly, she had not achieved prominence due to her grass-roots

campaigning. Rather, her status derived from the fact that she was Clarkson's daughter. Haydon's image encapsulates many of the themes of Dr Gleadle's book. Women occupied an enduring but peripheral location within the contemporary political imagination. Their status within the world of public politics remained problematic throughout this period – even in campaigns apparently deemed suitable for female activism, such as anti-slavery. Family identities, moreover, remained crucial to the representation of women as political subjects even if, as Dr Gleadle demonstrates, there were alternative routes for middle-class women to achieve political status – particularly within their own communities.