

Celebrating women in the humanities and social sciences

For just over a century, International Women's Day has celebrated women and their achievements. Professor Pat Thane FBA and Professor Lisa Tickner FBA, who both participated in a British Academy event to mark International Women's Day on 8 March 2012, honour the female figures in the humanities and social sciences who continue to inspire them.

Pat Thane on Barbara Wootton

Barbara Wootton (1897–1988) grew up in an academic family in Cambridge. She had a rather oppressive mother who gave Barbara a lifelong hostility to bullying women – notably Margaret Thatcher, whom she met late in her career in the House of Lords, when she was Baroness Wootton, one of the first life peeresses. Her mother insisted that Barbara read classics at Girton College, Cambridge. While she was there, during the First World War, she married Jack Wootton who was on leave from the services. Sadly he died 36 days later. Barbara was shattered and took time out from Girton, but she gained the strength to resist her mother and on her return insisted on studying economics. She was awarded a starred first, but of course could not receive the degree at Cambridge at that time – Cambridge did not get around to giving degrees to women until 1948, though they were able to take exams and appear in the class lists.

After a period at the London School of Economics, Barbara returned to Girton as a lecturer. She was the first woman to lecture in economics at Cambridge in the 1920s, but, again, because Cambridge did not formally acknowledge the existence of women in the university, she

had to lecture in the name of a man – the economist Hubert Henderson. To Henderson's credit he volunteered for the role to enable her to give some lectures and insisted that the University should add, in brackets, that his lectures would be delivered by Mrs Wootton. John Maynard Keynes rightly described this as a disgraceful slight to women.

After women partially gained the vote in 1918, Barbara joined the very active campaign in the 1920s to assist and encourage women to use the vote to redress the multiple gender inequalities they suffered. She was one of the first female magistrates to be appointed and the youngest of the first cohort. This had only become possible in 1920. She was appointed in 1926, aged 29 and still too young to vote – it was not until 1928 that women were able to vote at age 21; it was 30 until then. She remained a magistrate for 40 years. Along with other women – including the feminist and Independent MP, Eleanor Rathbone and the penal reformer and Principal of Somerville College, Oxford, Margery Fry – she played an important part in reforming this crucial part of the justice system, which had become rather moribund by the 1920s. These women insisted on a greater professionalisation and training for the role, and helped to make it respectable again.¹

Another notable first for Barbara was that she became one of the first Baronesses when women – following another long campaign – were at last appointed to the House of Lords in 1958. She was the first woman to sit on the woolsack as Deputy Speaker in 1967. A passionate believer in social equality and a lifelong Labour supporter, she was not the first or the last person to think that the constitution of the House of Lords, as



Figure 1. Barbara Wootton appeared on 'Any Questions?' at Nantyglo Community College and Sports Centre Complex, March 1974. Left to right: Owen Edwards (BBC), Barbara Wootton, David Jacobs, Enoch Powell, John Cole. Photo: Girton College Archives.

¹ Anne Logan, *Feminism and Criminal Justice: A Historical Perspective* (London: Palgrave, 2008).

she put it, was totally indefensible in a democracy: 'No one in his senses would invent this present House if it did not already exist'. However, she believed that, though an imperfect political system, the Lords had its uses and provided a position that could be used for good – and she tried.

She carried out her academic research and writing in parallel – holding an academic post at Bedford College, one of the women's colleges of the University of London – and maintained a close relationship with public service from the 1930s until her death in the 1988. She saw academic research and public policy as inextricably related, and believed passionately that academic expertise should be directed to the promotion of human welfare and provide a clear evidence base for public policy. Among other things, she worked with William Beveridge during and after the Second World War to fashion Labour's post-war full employment policy.

Barbara was an outspoken opponent of the dominance of abstract theory and detachment from empirical social problems evident in much research in the social sciences. This was an issue of very active and acrimonious debate in the 1950s and 1960s (as of course it still is to some degree). Some social scientists strongly resisted the idea that their work could be, and perhaps should be, useful in the making of public policy.

Her public and academic interests interconnected most closely on issues of criminal justice. As well as working as a magistrate, she was a member of four Royal Commissions (on Workmen's Compensation, 1938; the Press, 1947; Civil Service Pay and Conditions, 1953–5, which successfully recommended equal pay in the civil service; and on the Penal System, 1964–6) and four departmental committees. The first of these committees was the Committee on National Debt and Taxation in 1924. She later chaired a Home Office Sub-committee on Hallucinogens and in 1968 the 'Wootton Report' recommended that cannabis should attract lesser penalties than harder drugs, a recommendation which was implemented. She complained of the lack of evidence underlying the existing penalties for drug use, as with so many other areas of public policy. Barbara also chaired the committee that proposed Community Service Orders as an alternative to prison, which was implemented in the 1970s, and of course is still with us. She had long been critical of purely punitive sentences, which she believed the evidence showed too often only led to further offending, and she saw ways to achieve reform and



Figure 3. Lisa Tickner's mother, Doris Warton, in the 1930s.

rehabilitation of criminals rather than pure punishment. All of this formed the focus of her book *Social Science and Social Pathology* published in 1959.

Similarly, Barbara was relentlessly critical of orthodox economists' explanations of wage inequalities as purely the product of market forces, making no allowance for social and cultural forces, for example in explaining the gross gender inequalities in pay. She discussed this in her book *The Social Foundations of Wage Policy*, which was published in 1955 – a time when there was a very active women's equal pay campaign, and the year equal pay was finally conceded in the public sector (following the report of the Royal Commission, mentioned above, in which she participated), to be implemented gradually over five years.

She was also a founder member of the Abortion Law Reform Society in the 1930s, a supporter of unilateral disarmament, a supporter of the Homosexual Law Reform Association, both in the 1950s, and long an opponent of capital punishment. She was active in most of the major liberal causes of the mid-20th century.

Barbara Wootton was a remarkable woman who played a significant part in the long, slow, still incomplete process of equalising opportunities for men and women in Britain. I think she deserves to be remembered far more widely than she is.²



Figure 2. Virginia Woolf in her mother's dress, published in 'Vogue', 1926. Photo: Maurice Beck and Helen Macgregor.

Lisa Tickner on Virginia Woolf and Nancy Spero

Virginia Woolf (1882–1941)

I thought I'd start with mothers. Isn't it the mother – or whoever stands in place of the mother – who first 'inspires' us, in the etymological sense of breathing life into us? I don't mean physically, in giving birth to us, but by responding to our looks and gestures and so confirming in us the sense that we exist.

When it comes to inspiration in adult life, mothers can be complicated. Virginia Woolf was photographed (Figure 2) in her mother's dress for *Vogue* in May 1926 (she was writing *To the Lighthouse*, with its portraits of her parents Leslie and Julia Stephen as Mr and Mrs Ramsay). My mother, Doris Warton, was photographed on her motorbike at some point in the 1930s (Figure 3), an image that

² For more detail see Ann Oakley, *A Critical Woman: Barbara Wootton, Social Science and Public Policy in the Twentieth Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

has always been astonishing to me because so totally out of character with the woman I knew: an asthmatic, an arthritic, and an Olympic-class worrier. (Truly, as Judith Arcana says in *Our Mothers' Daughters*, our mothers come to us from a place where we didn't know them.)

Woolf famously claimed that 'we think back through our mothers if we are women', seeing the tradition of 'great male writers' as a source of pleasure but not of help. She meant elective rather than natural mothers, in whom the nurturing roles might be reversed. Feminine creativity required the murder of 'the Angel in the House', the internalised imago of her dead mother, Julia, a paragon of purity, deference, and chronic unselfishness: 'If there was chicken, she took the leg. If there was a draught, she sat in it'. In a fit of rage, Woolf throws her inkpot at her and kills her, though she died more than once, since 'it is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality'.

In that marvellous essay, *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf insisted on the importance of 'five hundred a year and a room of one's own'. In *Three Guineas*, she deplored the tendency to skimp on the girls for the sake of 'Arthur's education fund' ('a voracious receptacle'). My mother – a martyr to housework and her back – was not, in this sense,

my inspiration, but she did instil in me the belief that women should be educated and independent, perhaps all the more strongly because she was not in a position to be either. There was no competing 'Arthur' – I was an only child – but there was no money either.

Woolf was my inspiration as a young woman, and in the 1970s I bought the volumes of her collected letters and diaries one by one from the Flask Walk bookshop as fast as reviewers turned them in. She seemed to cast through muddy waters a penetrating light – 'of course', one thought as one turned the page – and the elegance of her prose shaped, but did not disguise, the anger that fuelled it.

What Woolf called 'the battle of the Royal Academy' was one among many, as women fought their way into institutions hitherto reserved to men (and as Germaine Greer points out, got in as the men were getting out, setting up brotherhoods and other kinds of antibodies). I was at art school in the 1960s, but it was really the next generation of women that grew up as it were *with both parents*, able to 'think through their mothers' as well as the fathers who'd taught them in the past – and able for that very reason to *use* the work of fathers and brothers for their own ends.

The sociologist, economist and social reformer Beatrice Webb was the first woman to be elected a Fellow of the British Academy, in 1931. Her life and work were celebrated in a British Academy biographical memoir, from which the following extract is taken.

[S]he was exceptionally sensitive and highly strung, with an artist's eye for the subtleties of individual character, and an unusual power of expressing them. The imagination to which collective humanity is as real and moving as individuals who are seen is not a common faculty. She possessed it to an extraordinary degree. 'To me', she once wrote, after quoting some lines by Sir Ronald Ross, the discoverer of the cause of malaria, 'a million sick have always seemed actually more worthy of sympathy than "the child sick in a fever" preferred by Mrs. Browning's Aurora Leigh'. Her early contacts with scientists strongly influenced her thought; but it was her imaginative grasp of the lot of unknown lives, rather than intellectual curiosity, which first turned her to sociology.

Once sure of her vocation, she mastered its methods by a long and painful conflict, disciplining her intellect and canalizing her emotions with an intensity of effort which, to judge by her diary, sometimes brought her near despair. Her touch of ascetic austerity, as of a Puritan casting behind him all impediments to his quest, was partly the legacy of that early struggle to subdue herself, partly the expression of a philosophy which disliked emphasis on the externals of life – luxury, ostentation, and the claims of pampered classes to special consideration – both as bad manners and as a source of social corruption. Her demands on brain and will were exacting; but she was not of the reformers who are intolerable in private life, nor did she, as some observers thought, live solely for

her work. She diffused warmth, as well as light, and was quick, amid all her preoccupations, to offer sympathy, encouragement, and wise counsel to individuals in need of them. Acquaintances, to whom her intellectual eminence meant little, described her as the kindest woman they had ever met. She thought companionship the most delightful form of happiness, and welcomed it with open arms.

'Beatrice Webb, 1858-1943', by R.H. Tawney FBA
(reprinted from *Proceedings of the British Academy*,
29, 1943, pp. 307–308)



(Martha) Beatrice Webb (née Potter), Lady Passfield.
Photo: unknown photographer, matte bromide print on card mount, c. 1940; NPG P1292(63) © National Portrait Gallery, London.



Figure 4. Nancy Spero in her studio, 71st Street, New York, 1973. Photo: Susan Weiley, courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York.

Nancy Spero (1926–2009)

Nancy Spero became an artist when that was still something of a struggle. Like Woolf she was angry and, with much less decorum but no less elegance, channelled that into her work. Woolf talks of a social occasion on which she was cornered by a man: ‘he could only say, “I-I-I” it must be I’. Spero, living in Paris with three children, felt that ‘I didn’t have a voice. I didn’t have an arena in which to conduct a dialogue. I felt like a non-person, an artist without a voice’.

In the early 1960s what she called these ‘strange creatures’ emerged in her work, screaming with their tongues sticking out, ‘saying “merde” and “fuck you”’. The Angel in the House would not have approved.

In 1965, back in New York, Spero’s rage was channelled outwards into the protest against the Vietnam War. She had found her community now. She began scribbling, with a kind of calligraphic fluency, a series of gouaches figuring the sexualised violence of the war. She later recalled that:

I wanted to make images to express the obscenity of war, the collusion of sex, male power and the power of the military. I started working rapidly on paper, angry works, often scatological...Phallic tongues emerge from human heads...human bodies dragged through mud...I used a lot of bloody colours and spit. The paintings are fragile but they are very angry...The act of erasing bodies was so violent that the paper was shredded. I rubbed away at the paper but to get it to shred I had to spit on it.

The process was violent, in other words, as well as the image.

Opposition to the Vietnam War gave her that ‘arena in which to conduct a dialogue’ that she’d looked for. What she evoked were the forms of psychic aggression

understood in Kleinian analysis in terms of the ‘rage against the mother’. But what inspired her was the work of a man, the French writer, Antonin Artaud, which enabled her to find her voice. Claire Pajackowska once said that she felt recognised by this work: that it brought out the worst in us – the sadism and sexuality – but that she felt known by it at quite a deep level, that the work understood her. Isn’t this what we look for – in our mothers and our sources of inspiration – to be recognised and *understood by them*?

By the 1970s, Spero had decided to use only images of women – her ‘reservoir of poses’ – from a riot of different cultural contexts. She aimed, she said, to ‘universalise the female’, so that man was no longer the measure of all things, so that images of women could speak to the generality of the human condition. Technically, she was brilliantly subversive. She wanted ‘to make little things, with bite’. So just printed paper, quite fragile, unframed, pinned to the wall – a conservationist’s nightmare – but then *Notes in Time* (1979) is 210 feet long. And that’s before later projects in which her lexicon of images was printed over columns and under domes and in subway stations across Europe and America. Get out at 66th Street in New York some time, near the Rockefeller Centre, and look at her mosaics (Figure 5).

Spero died in 2009 aged 83. As a person, she was humorous, generous, courageous and ingenious in the face of pain and disability. She had to be, because she was crippled with arthritis and in and out of hospital in her final years. She could do celebration and *jouissance* too, but the world of sexualised violence, to which she bore witness, hasn’t gone away – perhaps can’t go away. War is unique to humans, like language, like cooking. (Animals fight, but animals don’t have wars.) Juliet Mitchell argues that ‘The Law of the Mother’ prohibits the killing of siblings but that war is the organised, ‘legitimated’ breaking of that taboo. It can and will slide into acts of ‘illicit’ murder, torture and rape. Spero, a mother and an artist, says ‘Not in my name’. Her work reminds us that a creative response to war and violence is also uniquely human. There is a Latin tag that was for obvious reasons her sort-of motto: *dum spiro spero* – as I breathe, I hope.



Figure 5. Detail from ‘Artemis, Acrobats, Divas and Dancers’, Nancy Spero’s mosaics installed in 2004 at the 66th Street/Lincoln Center Subway Station, New York.



Figure 6. Fellows of the British Academy who participated in the panel discussion. Back row (left to right): Professor Nicola Lacey, University of Oxford; Professor Uta Frith, Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience; Professor Christine Chinkin, London School of Economics; Professor Marina Warner, University of Essex; Professor Pat Thane, King's College London. Seated (left to right): Rt Hon Baroness Hale of Richmond, Justice of the Supreme Court; Professor Anne Phillips, London School of Economics; Professor Lisa Tickner, Courtauld Institute of Art.

Pat Thane is Research Professor, King's College London; Professor Emerita of the University of London; and a Fellow of the British Academy.

Lisa Tickner is Visiting Professor, Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London; Professor Emerita of Art History, Middlesex University; and a Fellow of the British Academy.

The British Academy panel discussion on 'Celebrating women in the humanities and social sciences' was held on International Women's Day, 8 March 2012. Audio recordings of the contributions can be found via www.britac.ac.uk/events/2012/
