

WOMEN by Mary Claydon

"Gentlemen - The Ladies" has always been one of the toasts at dinners, but back in history women were far from being treated as 'Ladies' even in their own homes. With the coming of the great religions - Islam and Christianity - women were pushed into the background and over the centuries remained that way until after two world wars.

It was not until 1882 when the Married Woman's Property Act became law that a married woman had control of her own money even if she was a great heiress.

Whatever fortune she had in her own right automatically became her husband's property just as she was. Her husband could have mistresses and do what he pleased - spend all her money on gambling, drinking and other women but let her put one foot wrong and she lost everything her home, fortune and children. He could just divorce her and keep everything. After the introduction of the Act her property

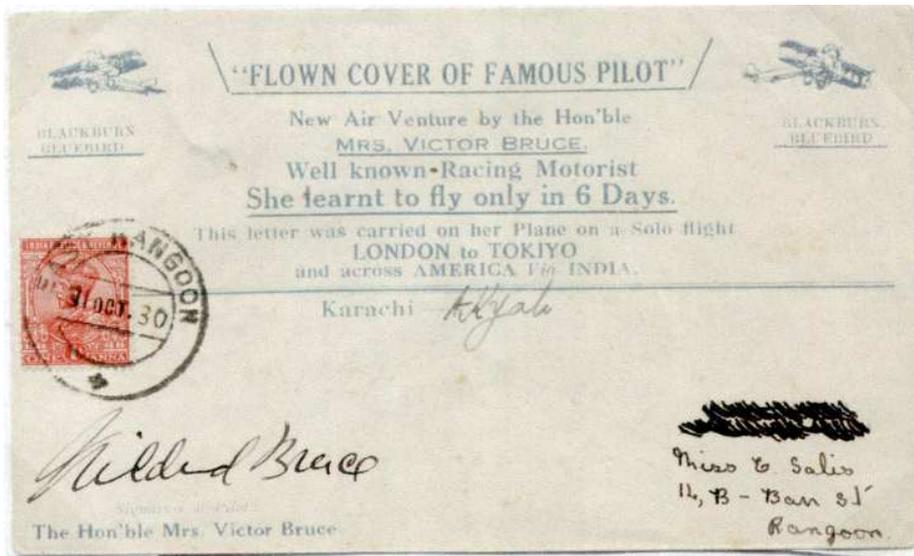
only meant what she had in her own right - probably through inheritance - any money saved from housekeeping or a dress allowance still belonged to her husband.

Although writing was considered a ladylike occupation amongst those who had the education even so some women wrote and published under a masculine alias such as George Elliot whose real name was Mary Ann Evans. Jane Austen's novels give a clear picture of behaviour in her times albeit mostly about the 'upper class'. Early writers include the Bronte sisters - Emily Jane who wrote *Wuthering Heights* and Charlotte who wrote *Jane Eyre* and Anne who wrote *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. All three wrote under male pseudonyms as well - Anne was Acton Bell, Charlotte-Currer Bell and Emily - Ellis Bell - which hid their femininity.

I think we can see why the suffragettes came into being and despite suffering cruelly at the hands of the men in power they went on fighting. Then with the first World War they called a truce and went to work as nurses - V.A.D.s - munition workers - doing mens' work in almost every field. In Great Britain this led to married women getting the vote in 1918 and every woman over the age of 21 in 1930. No doubt the bravery of the women on the battlefields and the publicity attending the death of Edith Cavell helped to change mens' minds. It is worth noting that the State of Wyoming gave women the vote in 1869 and New Zealand in 1898 no doubt because of the pioneer women who worked and suffered alongside their husbands. However here in Great Britain even after women got the vote once married you were relegated to the home and motherhood, though among the so called working class many women not only did all the housework, cooking and looking after children but they also worked to help the family income, some doing menial and hard jobs. Many men still thought they had the right to spend the family money on drinking and gambling. My father, who was a brewer, always told the story how on a Friday evening the women would line up outside the brewery gates to take the housekeeping money from their husbands before they could get to the pub.

There were women who had made their mark against all the odds in the 19th and 20th century - Marie Curie who together with her husband Pierre discovered radium and was given the Nobel Prize with her husband in 1903. In that same year she presented her doctoral thesis - the first advanced research degree to be awarded to a woman - in France. Elizabeth Garret Anderson was Britain's first woman doctor who started a hospital for women in London. Queen Elizabeth of the Belgians qualified as a doctor early in the 20th century. Elizabeth Blackwell was the first woman to qualify as a doctor in 1848 in the United States. Florence Nightingale, famed for her work in organising nursing in the Crimean War was responsible for the design of St. Thomas's Hospital in London and was always consulted on hospital design thereafter for the rest of her life. Her nursing training was the basis for that training world wide.





In aviation women were there alongside men going up in balloons at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. In 1910 Mme. Baronne de Laroche and Blanche Stuart Scott qualified as pilots. In the 1920s and 30s women in the air began to set records. Mrs. Victor Bruce (her name was Mildred) and Joan Page were pioneers flying in the 1920s. Most of us know of Amelia Earhart, Jean Batten and England's own Amy Johnson. As a child I remember hearing much about Amy Johnson and the song

written about her 'Amy Wonderful Amy'. Sadly both she and Amelia Earhart lost their lives flying the planes they loved. Amy disappeared over the Thames flying during the Second World War.



Women in politics have come to the fore during the 20th century. Countess Markievicz the Irish Revolutionary who was actually the first woman elected to the English Parliament though she refused to take her seat and became a Cabinet Minister in the Irish Parliament. Since then we have had Golda Meir - Prime Minister of Israel in 1969 she resigned in 1974. Indira Ghandi first woman Prime Minister of India - Dr. Hilda Bynoe first woman Governor of Grenada and of course though she has not appeared on a stamp our own Margaret Thatcher. The list of women

who have held high office in their countries is long and I will not bore you with them all.

Although actresses were at one time considered to be ladies of easy virtue none the less many made their name and money through the arts either in the theatre or musical

comedy - ballet and opera. Some became the mistresses of Kings and men in high places. Sarah Bernhardt and Lily Langtry both had affairs with Edward VII and many of the glamorous Gaiety Girls married into titled and monied families.

Even in 1947 after women had fought alongside men in all the forces and many were parachuted into France to aid the resistance, others worked in the factories in dangerous jobs, they still had to leave their jobs when they married. Can you imagine the outcry if a man had been told he had to leave when he married. There was still the feeling that women were kept by their husbands and therefore servants to their husbands. In 1955 women in the Civil Service, Local Government and Teaching were granted equal pay, the rest had to wait for the 1980's for equal pay to become law. Reading about all this gave me the idea of starting a thematic collection showing how the lives of women have changed.

Modern woman now has the entree to any career - we have women in every sphere - police - the armed forces - going to sea in the navy - flying bombers and fighters - going all over the world with the army as equal members alongside the men. They are politicians, lawyers, scientists and women have top jobs in the business world. We women owe all this to the women who fought for equal rights all those years ago and we should take our legacy seriously and make sure we vote in elections and fight for what we believe in, but we still have the place we had originally as well - homemakers and mothers. It's a hard world for many modern women who have to be able to juggle their frenetically busy lives. I have heard it said that a woman can do five things at once whilst a man can only handle one thing at a time!!! What have I laid myself open to ?- **never mind gentlemen we love you as you are.** -

(The title says it all for me, although I think there's something in the body language - we could be drifting apart? - Ed.)



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