Allowing for the family: Eleanor Rathbone and the effects of enfranchisement (1918-1928)

BY

Johanna ALBERTI *

ABSTRACT

ALLOWING FOR THE FAMILY: ELEANOR RATHBONE AND THE EFFECTS OF ENFRANCHISEMENT (1918-1928)

In this article, the Victorian-born suffragist Eleanor Rathbone's view of the impact of the franchise is placed alongside that of some of her contemporaries, and examined within the context of the postwar years. Expectations of the vote were radical, and the results were seen by contemporaries as of greater significance than is apparent with hindsight. It is suggested here that the effects of the war were ambiguous, but that the persistence of ideas about the family was crucial.

RÉSUMÉ

NE PAS OUBLIER LA FAMILLE : ELEANOR RATHBONE ET LES EFFETS DU DROIT DE VOTE FÉMININ (1918-1928)

Cet article examine en parallèle les vues de la suffragiste Eleanor Rathbone et celles de certaines de ses contemporaines à propos du droit de suffrage féminin. L'analyse se déroule dans le contexte des années d'après-guerre. On espérait alors que le droit de vote permettrait des changements radicaux et ses conséquences semblèrent avoir plus d'importance qu'il ne paraît aujourd'hui avec le recul du temps. L'article suggère que l'impact de la guerre en ce domaine fut ambivalent, mais que l'argument qu'il fallait tenir compte de la famille resta crucial.

* 25, Beverley Gardens, Cullercoats, North Shields NE30 4NS.

This article looks at the responses to enfranchisement of some British suffragists in the years between the Representation of the People Acts of 1918 and 1928. The first of these Acts only enfranchised women over thirty and the qualification was based on occupation, or marriage to an occupier, rather than residence as in the case of men. As a result of the Act eight and a half million women could vote, forming approximately 40% of the electorate. In 1928 all women under thirty were enfranchised on a residential qualification, bringing the number of women voters to nearly sixteen million or 52,7% of the electorate. The limited extent of the first Act has been seen as a mark of the failure of British suffragists, and it has been assumed by some historians that after the passionate and visible Edwardian years the interwar years were a period of dispersal and fragmentation for the women's movement. The First World War is understood to be significant in the genesis of this decline. The division of the National *Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship* —the renamed *National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies*— into 'New' and 'Old' has been seen as both cause and effect of the weakening of the movement. This article reflects on this apparent decline, using as a central focus the ideas and writings of one particular suffragist, Eleanor Rathbone. I shall set her views against those of other women who were active in the period 1918-1928, including some younger women who saw themselves as feminists, but had not been old enough to be active prewar suffragists.

Eleanor Rathbone was an active feminist and suffragist from the 1890s, and in 1929 she became a Member of Parliament at the first election in which all women could vote in Britain. She was thus active in the Edwardian suffrage movement and in the parliamentary political arena within which that movement had sought to give women a place and power. She came from a wealthy Liverpool middle-class family. After taking a degree at Cambridge, Eleanor became active in the suffrage movement and in the world of social action, consciously choosing a life of social and political engagement. In 1909 she became the first woman to sit on Liverpool City Council, and was at the same time a member of the executive committee of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. In March 1916 when a consultative committee of twenty-three suffrage societies was set to put pressure on the government, Rathbone was chosen as Chairman.

The significance of the vote

As the emergence of this committee during the war indicates, the surrender to the exigencies of war by members of the *National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies* (NUWSS) and the *Women's Social and Political Union* (WSPU) — the more militant 'suffragettes' — was not as complete as it has sometimes been

presented. When war broke out in 1914, victory for the suffrage movement may well have been imminent, and the hiatus in the activities of the executive committee of the NUWSS was brief and concerned most crucially with attitudes towards the war. Nevertheless the widespread movement involving many thousands of women which had existed on the eve of the war did to some extent disperse, and for many former suffragists the war had replaced the suffrage as the main focus of their thought and activity. This was the case for those who supported the peace movement, and for those who were civil servants, doctors, nurses or other ancillary workers. In 1918, Cicely Hamilton was working in a hospital near the Western Front: "*At the moment of official enfranchisement ... I didn't care a button for my vote; and, rightly or wrongly, I have always imagined that the government gave it me in much the same mood as I received it.*"[1]

It is indeed difficult to assess the impact of the war on the suffrage movement in the twenties. In a recent study, Susan Kingsley Kent has argued that "*prewar British feminists regarded their movement as an attack on separate sphere ideology and its constructions of masculinity and feminity*", and she believes that the Great War "*shattered the category of 'women' in ways that may have made it impossible before the 60s, for feminists to effectively recover their movement, its goals and its critique of the gender system.*"[2] The war was certainly seen as important by many suffragists at the time, particularly by younger women, but it was not understood as necessarily negative in its impact on women's pursuit of equality and freedom. Margaret Haig, Lady Rhondda, a suffragette before the war and in her mid-thirties in 1918, wrote in her autobiography that after the war:

> *We found ourselves in an utterly changed world ... We could not, even had we wished, join this new, comparatively sane world on the jagged edges of the one that had broken off five years before — this new one was quite a different place. The war had broken down barriers and customs and conventions. It had left us curiously free.*[3]

Above all, the war seemed to many suffragists to mean change, and they were uncertain what the nature of the change would be. Naomi Mitchinson, who was twenty-one when the war ended, wrote to her aunt, Elizabeth Haldane, a stalwart suffragist:

> *You have still a balance for your life: all that incredible pre-war period when things seemed in the main still settled, just moving solidly and calmly like a glacier towards all sorts of progress. But we have had the bottom of things knocked out completely, we have been sent reeling into chaos... We have to learn to try and make a world for ourselves, basing it as far as possible on love and awareness, mental and bodily...*[4]

Mitchinson went on to write that her generation wanted to base their new world "*on love and awareness... because it seems to us that all the repression and formulae, all the cutting off of part of experience, which perhaps looked sensible and even right in those calm years, have not worked.*" I think it is fair to assume that Mitchinson is referring to sexuality here, and I will look again at the perspective of some younger

feminists on marriage later in this paper. This perspective suggests some conformity with Kent's understanding that in the postwar years "*psychoanalysts, sexologists, and sex reformers sought in the study of sexuality the solution to the maintenance of domestic and international peace.*"[5]

This was not, however, the perspective of those suffragists like Naomi Mitchinson's aunt and her contemporary Eleanor Rathbone. For them the war seemed to bring immediate positive changes of attitude in woman which had nothing directly to do with sexuality. Rathbone believed that women who worked outside the home during the war had developed "*a greater confidence in themselves, and a taste for the satisfaction that is to be found in skilled, responsible, well-paid work*", and that those who received separation allowance as the wives of serving men had "*tasted for the first time the sense of security, of ease and dignity that comes from the enjoyment of settled income.*"[6]

Kent's argument about the impact of the war is based on her presumption that the demand for the vote represented a radical critique of the gender system. Rathbone's understanding of the suffrage was of a different nature. Certainly she saw the vote as immensely significant, likening it to the "*bursting open of a door which gave access to such riches...*"[7] In the year of the first enfranchisement of women she wrote that "*possession of the vote*" would give "*force to a movement that will not stop before it has swept away the barriers of the past and won for women their right place in the social as well as in the industrial organisation of society.*"[8] Evelyn Sharp, a suffragette, detected "*two lines of approach*" to the suffrage. "*Either you saw the vote as political influence, or you saw it as a symbol of freedom. The desire to reform the world would not alone have been sufficient to turn law-abiding and intelligent women of all ages and all classes into ardent rebels.*" But Sharp also believed that "*militant movement aimed at winning social and economic freedom for women as well as political equality for men.*"[9] Rathbone also referred to the vote as a "*symbol*", and she linked that concept specifically with citizenship.[10]

The concept of citizenship was a significant framework for Rathbone's arguments about both the **right** of women to the vote and the **need** for it as a tool for change. For some active nineteenth century women, citizenship did not imply an equal role with men in public affairs, but a different one which involved either a commitment to family for a married woman, a commitment to philanthropy for an unmarried woman. Jane Randall has identified an ideology behind the demand for the vote rooted in an acceptance of separate spheres which could co-exist with this gendered view. She has pointed out that leading Victorian suffragists formulated their demands in the language of "*public spirit*", "*an unselfish devotedness to the public service.*" For feminists in their tradition, women's "*rights were conceived in relationship to a duty or responsibility to others.*"[11] Eleanor Rathbone's thinking on the suffrage fitted into this tradition. For Rathbone the vote was always a "*practical instrument for effecting reforms.*"[12] After limited franchise was won, she referred to the vote as a keystone of a building: now that the stone was in place the work could begin. This work was within the "*sphere of feminism*", and, far from this way of describing the work being a limitation, it was "*merely the best and only effective way of getting the world's work done.*"[13]

New hopes, old obstacles

Rathbone's hopes for the change which would result from women's enfranchisement were especially buoyant in the years 1917-1919, a period when some of those who had fought long and hard for the vote felt a tremendous sense of accomplishment. This was especially the case for those who had continued the struggle into the war years, albeit in a more muted fashion. Evelyn Sharp had refused to pay taxes during the war, and when the franchise bill went through the House of Lords in February 1918, felt that she had lived "*to see the triumph of a lost 'cause'*", for which she had "*sacrificed much and would have sacrificed everything.*"[14] The war ended nine months after the partial winning of the vote, and an election was called immediately. The bill allowing women actually to stand for Parliament was passed just in time for the election in December, 1918. Enfranchisement brought a vivid sense of women's potential power to suffragists who were at the hub of political events. Ray Strachey, the Parliamentary Secretary for the N.U.W.S.S., wrote to her mother:

> *I come into the office in the morning to hear that the Liberal Whip's office is on the telephone, the Labour Party want me to ring them up, the Ministry of Reconstruction will see me at 11 and a dozen representative of this and that are asking for appointments.*[15]

By the end of the year, the obstacles to women's achievement of power were becoming more obvious. In July Strachey discovered that the Central Office of the Conservative Party was "*violently opposed to women MPs.*" In the same month, the Liberal Party asked her "*to suggest 20 women for them to run — but they must be Liberals and these are hard to find.*"[16] Ray's activities on behalf of Selina Cooper, a National Union organiser and Labour Party member from Nelson in Lancashire to obtain selection, indicate that a third problem for potential women candidates was that constituencies had already chosen their candidates before women were eligible to stand. This factor would not be so crucial in later elections, but misogyny and women's reluctance to commit themselves to one political party were significant factors in the paucity of women parliamentary candidates in the 1920s.

Making choices

The gaining of parliamentary seats by women was an obvious political aim for the partially successful suffrage movement. Apart from this goal, suffragists were faced in 1918 with the question of what to **do** with the vote. The intense struggle for suffrage in the Edwardian period had provided an apparently single focus, but the programme of reform which was contained within the demand for the vote was wide and deep in its scope.[17] There were differences in the precise shape if not the essential core of the ideology of suffragists. These differences became clearer after 1918. In the first place, different perspectives emerged in the choice of personal activity after 1918. Although Rathbone and Evelyn Sharp belonged to branches of the suffrage movement, we have seen that their expectations of the political

possibilities of the power of the vote were similar. The choices they made in 1918 were different. Once limited suffrage had been achieved, Evelyn Sharp resigned from the women's organisations of which she had been a member and joined the Labour Party. For her the separate struggle was over, and it was time to join in the existing political structure. While Sharp ceased to be a member of women's organisation, Eleanor Rathbone became the President of the *National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship*, believing strongly that a movement was still needed for other tasks beside the obvious one of obtaining the franchise on equal terms with men.

It is significant that Evelyn Sharp had not come into the suffrage movement from engagement in social action. She described her involvement in the suffrage movement as a distraction from her work earning her living as a writer. For many prewar suffragists the freedom to work and the resulting ability to be independent was a most important form of equality which they sought.[18] This point of view was expressed by Vera Brittain in an article published in 1929, in which she asked the prewar feminists to understand that such economic independence was a logical product of the women's movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A glance at the lives of two other feminists in the 1920s bears out this view. Winifred Holtby and Ray Strachey's private letters indicate how enormously important work was to these two feminists. Ray had been a suffragist before the war and was in her thirties in the 1920s while Winifred — too young to be a prewar suffragist — was in her twenties. This perspective on the importance of work was shared by a much older woman and a suffragette. In a speech to the *Women's Freedom League*, in 1927, Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence declared that for many women "*their self-chosen work is not only a means of self support but a means of self-expression.*"[19]

Beyond their paid employment Strachey and Holtby were deeply and passionately involved in what they saw to be the important issues of the day; in Winifred's case, international relations and in Ray's the opening of employment opportunities for women. Moreover Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, Ray Strachey and Winifred Holtby all engaged in voluntary work for women's political equality. Pethick-Lawrence was a leading member of the *Women's Freedom League*, a prewar suffrage organisation which continued its campaigning work into the 1920s; Strachey was involved in the NUSEC, and Holtby joined the *Six Point Group*, a new organisation set up in February, 1921.

The emphasis on work and on economic independence entailed feminists making different choices, and a limitation to the time available for voluntary political work, but no weakening of their commitment to women's political enfranchisement. Nor was there an ideological division between the desire for independence and the commitment to political change. On the contrary: Eleanor Rathbone expressed her central political demand for women — the demand for family allowances — in terms of their needs for economic independence. Nor did the existence of several different organisations working for equality entailed any broad disagreement on the aims of postwar suffragists. The aims of the *Six Point Group* and the NUSEC were

at first very similar, including in common equal franchise, equal pay, equal guardianship of children for parents of each sex and widows pensions. There was some shift in emphasis in the nature and direction of NUSEC's demands in the mid-1920s, a shift which Rathbone herself termed "*New Feminism.*" In 1918, she had already asserted that "'*Equality' is not a synonym for 'identity'*", and in 1925, she urged members of the NUSEC to "*demand what we want for women, not because it is what men have got, but because it is what women need to fulfil the potentialities of their own natures and to adjust themselves to the circumstances of their own lives.*"[20] In practical terms, this meant the inclusion of *"family endowment"* — later known as family allowances — and the provision of birth control information into the programme of the NUSEC. *Time and Tide*, a journal owned by the former suffragette, Lady Rhondda, argued that such "*social reforms*" were not feminist but did not argue that they were not worth fighting for. Winifred Holtby, who was beginning to write for *Time and Tide*, defended "Old" Feminism in an article first published in the *Yorkshire Post*.[21] One of the reasons she gave for her defence was that she disliked all feminism implied, and wanted to get on with her own work. It is also worth noting that she was writing as a new and young journalist, not someone who had thought deeply about where feminism had reached by the mid-1920s, nor where it was going. When she did this in the 1930s in *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, she made not overt criticism of New Feminism and included "*effective and accessible knowledge of birth control*" and the recognition that *"women's function of maternity"* was *"a service to society"* in the *"conditions of equality."*[22]

When she formulated "New Feminism", Eleanor Rathbone was anxious that the programme of her organisation might fail to "*arouse much enthusiasm or attract new recruits*" and thus "*the once broad river of the NUSEC dwindle till it becomes a trickle and loses itself in the sands.*"[23] For her "*the first essential is that our Societies must have life and have it abundantly. There must be no stagnation of the waters. They must be kept in constant motion by the influx of currents.*"[24] With the memory of the Edwardian Suffrage movement, Rathbone wanted the NUSEC to be large and its societies active. She was well aware that women were joining the newer Women's Institutes in much larger numbers than the NUSEC and, although she, like most feminists including Winifred Holtby in the interwar period, admired the work of the WIs, she was anxious that the NUSEC should remain in existence, at least until equal suffrage was obtained. The WIs gave women the opportunity to struggle for the improvement of the material circumstances of women's lives in national and, more importantly, in local terms.[25] As one suffragist put it, after the partial success of 1918, the members of the societies affiliated to the NUWSS were "*all burning to do practical things.*"[26]

In arguing that women should be full citizens with a vote, suffragists were in agreement. In the period after the achievement of the principle of the franchise, a wide variety of possible paths opened up, and suffragists did not necessarily agree about which to choose. In 1927, eleven members of the executive committee of the NUSEC resigned in order to be able to concentrate their energies on campaigning for equal pay and opportunities for women. This has been seen as marking a split

between Old and New Feminists, but it was more a case of suffragists making choices between priorities. The division may well have been exaggerated by modern historians seeking for an explanation for what they see as a lack of impact of women's suffrage on the political structures.

Knowing the difference

Any hopes of an immediate and marked impact by women on the political structures evaporated rapidly after 1918. Eleanor Rathbone was aware of a rapid reaction against the surge towards positive change which followed the ending of the war. In 1920, in her speech as president to the annual meeting of the NUSEC, she expressed her concern that the suffrage had become acceptable "*because it is possible to say of it that it has made no perceptive difference to politics...*" The one woman elected in 1918 was a member of Sinn Fein who had no intention of taking her seat. Between 1918 and 1928 were never more than eight women MPs at any one time. The largest number of women standing for Parliament between 1918 and 1928 was 41, and four out of five women stood in constituencies that were usually hopeless prospects for their party. Nevertheless, as Martin Pugh has pointed out, the women candidates who fought in elections in the 1920s — often in by-elections — did much to explode exaggerated fears and prejudices. Pugh also argues that the concentration of legislation for women in the 1920s was unprecedented, and emphasises "*that the substantial achievements of the women's movement after 1918 were not inconsistent with the formal decline of feminist organisations.*" He has demonstrated that women were often the invisible workers behind the scenes in the political parties, and acknowledges that the political parties "*had reservations about incorporating women on an equal footing with men.*"[27]

Suffragists had their reservations about politicial parties. Lady Rhondda's journal, *Time and Tide*, asserted in 1923 that "*the time has not yet come for women to join parties*", and Eleanor Rathbone entitled her speech to the NUSEC in 1924, "*Put Not Your Trust in Parties.*"[28] In 1929, Rathbone stood for Parliament as an Independent, but her success was only possible because she represented University graduates who had two votes in the interwar period. This meant that Rathbone did not have to make the compromises that Evelyn Sharp felt would have "*troubled me to the point of rendering me either obstructive or ineffective.*"[29] The complex of forces militating against women's entry into the parliamentary arena was to be much stronger than suffragists had anticipated.

One of the pressures against women entering politics was the assumption that married women MPs would be neglecting their families. Suffragists sought for the freedom to mother children without sacrificing their economic independence, but they rarely challenged the idea that women should bear the main responsibility for childcare and domestic work. Moreover, the assumption that for a woman marriage was a burden militating against personal freedom and public achievement was shared by feminists as well as anti-feminists. Winifred Holtby wrote:

> *I don't believe that marriage in the ordinary, middle-class, comfortable way is really good for women. It seems to make them so complacent and dependent... If one has a household and children, it's not easy to be anything but a housekeeper. I think it's better not to marry.*[30]

Later she was to observe how difficult it was to break free from the role of housekeeper when her close friend Vera Brittain struggled to continue working and have a family. Ray Strachey also fought against the odds to develop a career and bring up two children with considerable success — and an enormous expenditure of energy. Like Brittain, she accepted the main responsibility for her children, and was only able to achieve a degree of independence because she could afford to pay other women to help with domestic work. As Carol Dyhouse has pointed out: "*The force of demands for a more equitable division of labour between the sexes in this area remained latent whilst the middle classes could rely on paid labour to 'black their stoves' for them.*"[31]

Eleanor Rathbone shared the widespread acceptance of women's domestic role, and she had from the first urged suffragists to allow for the family. As a politicial activist, she saw herself as speaking particularly on behalf of married women who did not have the opportunity to speak for themselves, as acting on behalf of others.[32] In 1918, she asserted that the giving of the vote to married women would lead them to "*recognise that they have become persons — wholly, and not fractionally, as before. It will matter what they think, and it will matter enormously what they* should *think.*" During the First World War she worked for a voluntary organisation in helping to administer separation allowances to the wives of men serving in the forces. This experience confirmed her belief that the effect of such a system on "*the health and happiness and upon the status of the wife and mother*" was entirely positive.[33] Since her earliest years as a suffragist Rathbone had argued that it would not be possible to obtain equal pay for women without giving married women an income of their own through what was originally termed "*the endowment of motherhood.*" She was optimistic after the end of the war that the separation allowances would be continued. These hopes were frustrated, but she did not cease to campaign for family allowances which were introduced finally just before she died in 1946. For Rathbone economic independence was vitally important:

> *There can be no real independence, whether for men or for women, without economic independence. Few of us can realise how constantly and subtly this half-conscious, but ever-present sense of the economic dependence of the woman upon the man corrodes her personality, checks her development, and stunts her mind...*[34]

Eleanor Rathbone saw the vote as crucial, but knew that it was not enough in itself to give women full citizenship. The ten years which followed the partial achievement of enfranchisement were to offer a lesson in the slow process of political change. Rathbone had warned other suffragists as early as 1916 of the dangers of losing in periods of reaction, what had been gained in a "*period of enthusiasm.*"[35] In 1920 she spoke of those

> *happy innocents — who thought that when the vote was won (though only for some women) the need for sex solidarity was over and we might venture to behave as if we had already reached the place where "there are neither male nor female; neither bond nor free".*

And the next year she warned that suffragists were "*living through a period of reaction.*" The time taken to achieve full suffrage proved her point. Nevertheless, Rathbone never doubted the power of the vote: "*We used to be told that we exaggerated the power of the vote, but only ourselves can know the difference — the innate difference — it has made to our work — in atmosphere, in rate of progress, in solid results.*" Winifred Holtby echoed her words five years later:

> *Quite apart from the increased self-confidence, freedom of judgement, interest and activity which women have won for themselves during the past fifty years — (a psychological revolution which, in spite of all set-backs and contradictions is still beyond adequate calculation) — the change of emphasis in social and political action since they acquired direct political influence has been enormous.*[36]

Looking back from the 1990s it is easy to belittle that sense of achievement and to read this as the rhetoric of the deluded. On the other hand, the small proportion of MPs who are women, the fact that women continue to do a disproportionate amount of domestic work and the failure of the economic system to "*allow for the family*" in the sense of recognising the financial burden of bringing up children, should warn us against such judgements.

NOTES

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4. J. ALBERTI, *Beyond Suffrage*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989, p. 222.
5. KENT, *Making Peace*, p. 140.
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7. E. RATHBONE, *The Harvest of the Women's Movement*, London: W. H. Taylor, 1935.

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9. E. SHARP, *Unfinished Adventure*, London: John Lane, 1933, pp. 128, 132.

10. E. RATHBONE, *Common Cause*, 11 June 1915, p. 131.

11. J. RENDALL, "Citizenship, Culture and Civilisation" in C. DALEY & M. NOLAN (eds), *Suffrage and Beyond*, Aukland: Aukland U.P., 1994.

12. E. RATHBONE, *Common Cause*, 5 July 1917, p. 163.

13. E. RATHBONE, *Common Cause*, 15 February 1918, p. 573.

14. E. SHARP, *Unfinished Adventure*, p. 4.

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18. C. DYHOUSE, *Feminism and the Family*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1989.

19. J. ALBERTI, *Beyond Suffrage*, pp. 132-3.

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24. *Ibid.*, pp. 37-8.

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26. J. ALBERTI, *Beyond Suffrage*, p. 25.

27. M. PUGH, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992, pp. 319, 321.

28. M. PUGH, "The Impact of Women's Enfranchisement" in DALEY (ed.), *Suffrage and Beyond*, p. 318.

29. E. SHARP, *Unfinished Adventure*, p. 199.

30. W. HOLTBY, *Letters to a Friend*, London: Collins, 1937, p. 90.

31. C. DYHOUSE, *Feminism and the Family*, p. 144.

32. J. ALBERTI, *Eleanor Rathbone*, London: Sage, forthcoming.

33. E. RATHBONE, *Common Cause*, 17 March 1916, p. 648; 25 October 1918, p. 322.

34. E. RATHBONE, *Equal Pay and the Family*, p. 10.

35. E. RATHBONE, *Common Cause*, 18 June 1916, p. 155.

36. W. HOLTBY, *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, p. 134.