

# William Thompson, a Pioneer of European Socialism

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**An Irish landowner, economist, philosopher and defender of women's rights, William Thompson was one of the greatest Socialist figures before Marx. Nowadays neglected, his thought nevertheless has many echoes with important contemporary debates, from the critique of capitalism to the rise of feminism.**

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In 1830, the English poet and writer John Minter Morgan paid an especially glowing tribute to one of his peers and friends, the Irish socialist William Thompson (1775-1833):

“Neglected THOMPSON, whose attainment towers  
Beyond the reach of critics’ feebler powers!  
Has taught them wisdom – for behold them mute.  
But when this weaker generation’s past,  
And struggling truths, unfetter’d rise at last –  
Then shall his worth transcendent be confess’d  
And distant nations by his genius bless’d.”<sup>1</sup>

Recognised in 1824 for his *Inquiry into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth*, which tackled the origin of social and economic inequalities in the wake of modern capitalism

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<sup>1</sup> John Minter Morgan, *The Reproof of Brutus: a Poem*, 1830, p. 69-70.

<sup>2</sup> “It was a lutte corps à corps between Owenites and political economists, whom the Owenites regarded as their most inveterate opponents: but it was a perfectly friendly dispute. We who represented political economy, had the same objects in view as they had, and took pains to show it; and the principal champion on their side was a

and industrialisation, Thompson soon became one of the most prominent actors in the first British socialist movement, which was federated by Robert Owen (1771 – 1858) in the 1820s and 1830s. And yet, despite the would-be prophetic undertones of Morgan's praise, William Thompson has remained largely forgotten. The “weaker generation” mentioned above and many more afterwards are long gone, but “nations” are still unaware of his name, not to mention the “worth” and “genius” the poet attributed to him. However, his economic and political thought makes him one of the pioneers of British and European socialism, notably regarding to the concept of surplus-value, which later became central in Marx's thought. Along with Robert Owen, Thompson also was one of the first theoreticians and defenders of co-operative economy. Lastly, his condemnation of gender inequalities makes him a major thinker in the history of British feminism, on par with Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill.

## **“A member of the Idle Classes”**

William Thompson was born in 1775 in Cork, Ireland. Little is known about his mother, except for the fact that she died in 1825. His father, John Thompson, was a wealthy merchant and landowner, turned lord mayor of Cork in 1794. The Thompsons were members of the Protestant Ascendancy and had settled in Ireland in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, taking lands and occupying positions of power. When his father died in 1814, Thompson inherited his estate in Glandore, his fleet of trading vessels, as well as his membership in various learned societies, such as the Cork Institution. He nevertheless stood out from the Protestant elite he belonged to.

First of all, though he personally was rather agnostic and critical towards religious institutions, he nonetheless rejected any type of faith-based discrimination. He opposed the significant restriction of civil and political rights imposed on Catholics after the 1800 Act of Union, which had annexed Ireland to Great Britain, thus forming the United Kingdom. During the 1812 election, which were held to choose a representative for Cork in the British Parliament in London, Thompson thus supported Christopher Hely-Hutchinson, an advocate of Catholic emancipation. He then supported Daniel O'Connell, (1775-1847), a man celebrated to this day in Ireland as “The Liberator” due to his non-violent campaign to put an end to the restrictions upon Catholics' rights in 1829.

Second of all, Thompson was no absentee landowner, and endeavoured to improve his tenants' living and working conditions. Generation after generation, up to the XX<sup>th</sup> century, the inhabitants of Glandore would perpetuate the memory of this man, whom their ancestors had judged to be the best landlord and employer. In his *Sketches in Carbery, county Cork: its Antiquities, History, Legends and Topography* (1876, p.69), Doctor Donovan devoted an entire

chapter to Thompson, whose “peculiar habits, strange creed, and extraordinary theories” made him a local celebrity. He is remembered as a frugal vegetarian, who did not drink nor smoke, who would take walks in Glandore displaying a French three-coloured flag flying at the end of his walking stick as a sign of sympathy with republican ideas, and who would set up chemical experiments, which would never fail to make him appear as some sort of magician in people's eyes.

Lastly, Thompson was well aware of the privileges his social status gave him, and described himself as a “member of the Idle Classes”. In his pamphlet *Labor Rewarded* (1827, p.1), he stated: “For about the last twelve years of my life I have been living on what is called rent, the produce of the labor of others.” Willing to put an end to this injustice, he wished, through his intellectual work, to reach an equality of usefulness with the productive class.

## **A disciple of Bentham advocating a “chrestomatic” education**

Thompson's first foray into public debate was about education. A member of the Cork Institution, he blamed the latter for failing to fulfill the mission for which it had been created in 1806: to educate and instruct Cork's children, especially those of its most working-class neighbourhoods. Thompson made his point in a series of letters addressed to his fellow board members, first published in the *Cork Southern Reporter*, and later in pamphlet form under the title of *Practical Education for the South of Ireland* (1818). He pointed at the institution's economic and educative flaws, condemning the systematic exclusion of women as well as the curriculum, which was not fitted, according to him, to properly prepare students to professional life and citizenship. He thus suggested a plan for a cheap and liberal educative system, with a curriculum focused on teaching both men and women about the basics of political economy and agriculture, rather than on the rote learning of dead languages.

Thompson's involvement in educational reform reminds of Utilitarian education as defined by the philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) in his treaty *Chrestomathia* (1815-16). In fact, after the controversy with the Cork Institution, Thompson contacted Bentham in order to get advice from him on the matter. The few letters that have survived from their epistolary exchanges shows that they wished to create a school in Cork, though the project never came to fruition. Due to their common interests, Bentham invited Thompson in his home in London; the Irishman stayed there for five months between 1822 and 1823. During his stay, he met many prominent Utilitarians, among whom James Mill (1773–1836), John Stuart Mill's father. Thompson considered himself to be one of Bentham's disciples and wrote about him that he had “done more for moral science than Bacon did for physical

science” (*Distribution of Wealth*, 1824). Such influence is evident throughout Thompson's thought, as he always reasoned in terms of utility. It was in everyone's interest to act in such a way that the sum of pleasure resulting from their decisions shall be bigger than the sum of displeasure it caused, thus bringing the most happiness possible. If actions fulfil this goal, then they are said to be useful. In politics, Utilitarianism seeks to bring, the “greatest happiness of the greatest number” at community level.

## **A Utilitarian philosopher converted to Owenism**

Around the same time, Thompson met another figure who would come to have a significant impact on his political and intellectual journey: Robert Owen, a Welsh entrepreneur, philanthropist and social reformer, especially known for his enlightened management of New Lanark's mill, in Scotland, which he had owned since 1800. Under Owen's tenure, the minimum age allowed to enter the factory was increased, working hours were reduced to ten and a half a day, a health insurance fund was established, a doctor was put on the company's payroll, and children were given a good education. These social advances testified of Owen's philanthropic will to improve workers' conditions. These concerns were then adapted on a national scale, in the context of the economic crisis which struck Great Britain after the Napoleonic Wars. In 1816, Owen failed to convince Parliament to adopt a law regulating child labour in British factories. Losing hope in the possibility to tackle the social question through political and legislative means, he opted for a more radical project: the establishment of small industrial and agricultural communities, or “Villages of Co-operation”, where the poorest would live and work to meet their needs, thus achieving economic self-sufficiency. This project was soon criticized by the Radicals, who deemed it to be just another type of workhouse. Thompson also rejected it at first, viewing these communities merely as an improved variation upon the public relief system of the Poor Laws, which, in his opinion, had failed to tackle the structural causes of poverty.

Thompson's eventual support for Owenism was informed by his first book, *Inquiry into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth*, published in 1824. Thompson used the Utilitarian principle of “the greatest happiness of the greatest number” to denounce the economic and social inequalities of his time. In that context, he conceded that Owen's project might offer a possible solution. Far more than an improved workhouse, Thompson now saw the co-operative community as a truly positive and proactive means of action, allowing a deep transformation of the economic and social systems. These communities were to be as much an investment for the present as for the future, in so far as they potentially were both a remedy to the existing inequality and misery, but also an alternative economic and social organisation, which could ideally extend to the whole territory. The future of co-operation depended entirely on its ability to convince everyone that it was indeed the best possible social organisation. How, then, could one replace political and economic systems which were

incompatible with human progress and happiness? For Thompson, this would not arise through the use of force and revolutionary violence, but by

“convincing those who support [these systems] as well as those who are injuriously affected by them, that their happiness would be increased by joining in the new social arrangements” (*Distribution of Wealth*, p. 564).

## **Questioning the “system of individual competition”**

In *Distribution of Wealth*, Thompson denounced the capitalist economy of his time, which he called a “system of individual competition”, whereby everyone was caught up in a frantic race for wealth and private property. Yet, in this competition, some already possessed lands, capital, and money, while others only had their labour to sell, thus resulting in an excessive accumulation of wealth on the one side, and an ever more desolating impoverishment on the other. From Thompson's Utilitarian standpoint, this extreme inequality was an absurdity in itself. Indeed, if physical comfort greatly influences the pleasure and reduces the displeasure felt by an individual, this happiness, however, does not increase proportionally to the accumulation of wealth. Therefore, throughout society, the larger the population benefiting from such comforts, the bigger the mass of happiness.

To explain the unequal distribution of wealth, Thompson presented a theory of workers' exploitation—workers whom he considered to be the sole creators of wealth. To him, profit came from the added value created by labour; without it, lands, materials, buildings and machines would not produce anything. Yet, this surplus-value was taken away from their creators, due to capitalists and landowners. The notion of surplus-value developed by Thompson is indebted to the labour theory of value initiated by Adam Smith and David Ricardo, and later expanded upon by Karl Marx and others. According to this theory, the competitive system produces a society in which everyone's interest is seen as being opposed to other people's. As a Utilitarian, Thompson saw individual interest as the sole form of rational motivation; nevertheless, this competitive system pushes people towards pure selfishness, making them behave in ways that contradicts general interest. If Bentham considered that legislative restrictions would limit the harm caused to others in one's pursuit of happiness, Thompson, on the other hand, deemed it necessary to entirely reshape the essence of social institutions, so that personal and general interest would coincide

Therefore, Thompson argued that one must determine which economic system and which distribution of wealth might ensure the greatest happiness of the greatest number. To do so, he elaborated what he called “natural laws of distribution”, that is to say “those general rules or first principles, on which all distribution of wealth ought to be founded, in order to produce the greatest aggregate mass of happiness to the society, great or small, producing it” (*Distribution of Wealth*, p.3). The first law states that workers, the real producers of surplus

value, ought to benefit from it (notably because it would increase their productivity). The second one says that any exchange must be truly voluntary instead of coerced. The third specifies that work must be voluntary. These laws, according to Thompson, would insure the reconciliation between fair distribution and continuous production. But it could only work within autonomous communities, with a population comprised of 500 to 2,000 voluntary members, who would collectively produce all necessities of life. In this relatively restrained frame, and to simplify management and organisation issues, private property would be abolished and replaced by collectivised capital, so that all members would equally possess the means of production and the fruit of their collective labour. These communities would also include an educative system available for all, public assistance as well as a democratic government.

## **A theoretician and activist within the British Co-operative movement**

Though the British co-operative movement was greatly informed by Robert Owen's community schemes, William Thompson established himself as a major theoretical reference within that same movement, following the publication of his *Distribution of Wealth*. John Minter Morgan, who was also an early co-operator, described the book as the most important publication since Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (Dooley, 1996, p. 26). In 1827, Thompson wrote *Labor Rewarded*, a pro-cooperation pamphlet which was equally well-received. Furthermore, he contributed to numerous newspapers such as the *Co-operative Magazine*, the *London Co-operative Magazine*, or the *Weekly Free Press and Co-operative Journal*. Besides his activities as a writer, Thompson partook in an array of practical endeavours, such as debating, lecturing or meeting workers. In his memoirs, the Utilitarian philosopher John Stuart Mill, reminisced about a series of debates which had opposed political economists—himself included—and Owenites in the 1820s, and crowned William Thompson as a “very estimable man”, and the “principal champion” on his opponents’ side (Mill, 1873, 124-125).<sup>2</sup> Lastly, Thompson sought to establish co-operative communities, notably on his own estate in Cork from 1827 onwards, though the project never came to fruition as his family opposed it.

Ideological disagreements existed between Owen and Thompson. Whereas the latter defended democratically organized communities, Owen favoured a paternalistic government similar to the one he had been established at New Lanark, arguing that the working classes

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<sup>2</sup> “It was a lutte corps à corps between Owenites and political economists, whom the Owenites regarded as their most inveterate opponents: but it was a perfectly friendly dispute. We who represented political economy, had the same objects in view as they had, and took pains to show it; and the principal champion on their side was a very estimable man, with whom I was well acquainted, Mr. William Thompson, of Cork, author of a book on the *Distribution of Wealth*, and of an *Appeal* in behalf of women against the passage relating to them in my father's *Essay on Government*.” in MILL John Stuart, *Autobiography*, London, Longsman, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1873, p. 124-125

(then deprived of the vote) had not yet achieved the political maturity required for self-determination. Their differences only increased after the failure of New Harmony's community, which Owen had founded in America between 1825 and 1828. When Owen returned to Great Britain in 1829, he was hesitant to begin other similar experiments, while Thompson exhorted the immediate establishment of communities. Thompson's sense of emergency can be explained by how much his health—which had always been frail—had been deteriorating since 1830. On this very year, he wrote his *Practical Directions for the Speedy and Economic Establishment of Communities*, a handbook which provided prospective founders with an all-encompassing, turnkey plan to build intentional communities. Thompson learnt from past failed attempts, such as Owen's New Harmony experiment, as well as those led in Great Britain by his supporters, like George Mudie, Abram Combe and Alexander Hamilton, at Orbiston, Scotland (1825-1827). On top of that, Thompson did not forget about his own endeavours on his estate. Consequently, the *Practical Directions* covered a wide variety of topics, including raising capital, choosing the best land, the ideal number of inhabitants and how to select them, building and energy types, farming, manufacturing, educational and health arrangements, labour time and distribution, and lastly, how to manage internal affairs.

The plan was submitted during the first Co-operative Congress held in Manchester in 1831, and the co-operators—who now called themselves “Owenites” or “Socialists”—approved it as their political blueprint

While Thompson favoured small communities of no more than 2,000 inhabitants, Owen wished to establish a single, flagship community, big enough to achieve economic independence in the face of capitalist production. In 1832, during the third Co-operative Congress, Owen thus refused to fund Thompson's plan, even though it had been democratically adopted the previous year. Eventually, despite Owen's opposition, the choice to follow Thompson's directions was reaffirmed during the following Co-operative Congresses throughout the 1830s. According to the historian Richard Pankhurst, this unwavering grassroots support can notably be explained by Thompson's democratic methods and opinions, which strongly contrasted with Owen's autocratic leanings. Thompson's concrete suggestions to achieve results as quickly as possible, even on a modest scale, also seduced the fervent but impoverished Owenite movement (Pankhurst, 1954, p. 120), whose members mostly hailed from the urban working classes.

## **William Thompson and Anna Doyle Wheeler's co-operative feminism**

Though Thompson had already defended the cause of women in his early writings, especially with his claim that the same education should be given to boys and girls alike, he truly developed his ideas on the matter with his *Appeal of One Half the Human Race* (1825),

co-written with the Irish feminist Anna Doyle Wheeler. In the introduction to the book, Thompson declared himself the “scribe and interpreter” of Anna Doyle Wheeler's reflexions and experiences, and dedicated the book to her. Since he considered the text to be their “joint-property”, and as Wheeler co-wrote the *Appeal's* concluding section, introducing this lesser-known author is in order.

The daughter of an Irish Protestant clergyman, Anna Doyle married at fifteen years of age a man called Francis Massy Wheeler, whose alcoholism quickly made their union unbearable. In the course of the twelve years she spent with him, she gave birth to six children, but only two girls survived. During this time span, she undertook to teach herself political philosophy, and notably discovered the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft. In 1812, Wheeler managed to flee her husband's house with her daughters. She spent several years in France, where she met Charles Fourier as well as Saint-Simon's followers, before returning to England. Having become a personal friend of Robert Owen's and a proponent of his system, she wrote in the co-operative press, gave lectures and acted as a go-between between socialists on both sides of the Channel. It is in this context that Thompson and Wheeler got acquainted. Pankhurst underlines the singularity of their “friendship of mutual opinions and ideals unique in its day, for the rigid conventions of the time and the immense disparity between the educations afforded to the sexes made intellectual contact between men and women extremely rare” (Pankhurst, 1954, p. 54).

In 1824, both of them were outraged by James Mill's article “On Government”, which he had published in the supplement to the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Mill argued that common people should be granted political representation in Parliament, but he excluded women from the suffrage, on the grounds that their interests could indisputably be included in those of their fathers or husbands. Appalled that no voice would publicly denounce such exclusion, Thompson and Wheeler set out to write the *Appeal* as a rebuke of Mill's article. They first countered that Mill did not mention unmarried women, let alone widows and orphans, which invalidated his claims against female suffrage.

Even if the interests of women and those of their husbands and fathers were truly identical, there was no legitimate reason for the law to grant one party control over the other. But the core of the *Appeal's* philosophical argumentation underlined how inconsistent Mill's statement was compared to the rest of his theories, thus turning his very own arguments against him. Indeed, Mill's premises rest on the assumption that, on the one hand, each individual is the best judge of their own interests and that, on the other, whomever detains power is bound to abuse it. Consequently, an individual or a group will always prioritize their own interests before those of the community provided they are were not checked and limited by counter-powers. These principles thus contradict the idea that men would indeed respect women's voices when speaking on their behalf. Therefore, to think that women's interests would be taken into account without giving them the vote is erroneous according to Mill's own principles.



Thompson and Wheeler were absolutely against any exclusion of women from civil as well as political rights, and they considered it should be very easy to lift the weight of these “factitious constraints” imposed on women once and for all. According to the *Appeal*, “It is only to abolish all prohibitory and exclusive laws,—the remnants of the barbarous customs of our ignorant ancestors; particularly the horrible and odious inequality and indissolubility of that disgrace of civilization, the present marriage code” (Thompson, 1825, p. xxix-xxx). Indeed, Thompson and Wheeler harshly condemned the institution of marriage, which put women at men's mercy, as the law gave the latter quasi-despotic powers over the former. Rejecting the widespread illusion that marriage was at the time a voluntary contract between two parties, they considered it to be founded on a power dynamic between dominant and dominated, much like the relationship between employer and worker. In the *Appeal*, the condition of wives is often compared to that of slaves or poor people subjected to the East India Company. Thompson makes it very clear that it is in no way a mere image: married women are but slaves serving their husbands; if they are not recognized as such, it is purely out of habit, on the part of public opinion as well as women themselves.

Though Thompson and Wheeler demanded that women obtain political and civil rights, as much as they defended educational, sexual, domestic and moral equality between the sexes, they still believed that none of these gains would be enough as long as it did not come with a complete revision of the economic system. *The Appeal* thus stated:

“In truth, under the present arrangement of society, the principle of individual competition remaining, as it is, the master-key and moving principle of the whole social organization [...] it seems impossible – even were all unequal legal and unequal moral restraints removed, and were no secret current of force or influence exerted to baffle new regulations of equal justice – that women should attain to equal happiness with men. Two circumstances—permanent inferiority of strength, and occasional loss of time in gestation and rearing infants—must eternally render the average exertions of women in the race of the competition for wealth less successful than those of men. [...] Though in point of knowledge, talent and virtue, they might become their equals; in point of independence arising from health, they must, under the present principle of social arrangements, remain inferior.” (Thompson, 1825, p. xxvi-ii)

Therefore, Thompson and Wheeler's hope in social and feminist progress ultimately relied on the success of the co-operative communitarian system inspired by Robert Owen—a system which never successfully took root.

## **From a paradoxical posterity to a late rediscovery**

On March 28<sup>th</sup>, 1833, William Thompson died in Rosscarbery, Ireland, leaving behind a will that showed his devotion to the co-operative cause. He bequeathed his estate to the Owenite movement, and demanded that his money be used to establish communities and to help working-class people, especially young women, afford admission fees. A part of

Thompson's funds was meant to help republish his books and to encourage the general diffusion of co-operative ideas. However, his sisters, Miss Lydia Thompson and Mrs Sarah Dorman, as well as the latter's husband, categorically refused to see their inheritance end up in the hands of a political movement they deemed immoral (since the co-operative ideal blurred social hierarchies between employer and labourer). A long juridical battle between the advocates of co-operation and Thompson's family ensued. After many years in court, the final decision favoured the family, though the movement obtained some funds, which allowed an abridged version of *Distribution of Wealth* to be reprinted in 1850 and later again in 1869. By that time, however, the Owenite movement no longer existed, ever since its community at Queenwood, Hampshire, had gone bankrupt in 1845. The hope for social change in Great Britain no longer relied on Thompson's communitarian dream, but rather on more politically committed movements, such as Chartism, which demanded universal suffrage for men, and more generally on the emergence of a more combative form of socialism, led by the rise of Marxism and trade unions in Europe.

Yet, Thompson's political and economic thought has remained partly relevant. In 1845, after the Owenite movement collapsed, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels began working on their *Communist Manifesto* (1848) and frequently met at Chetham's Library in Manchester to do so. There, they read the writings of those now commonly known as the "Ricardian Socialists", including Thomas Rowe Edmonds, John Francis Bray, Thomas Hodgskin, and especially William Thompson. Marx thus became acquainted with the *Distribution of Wealth*. Looking more closely at historiography, Thompson's posthumous fate heavily depended on the major part that Marxism has played in the history of socialism. Having been the first ones to rehabilitate Thompson's work in the history of economic thought, Marx and Engels defined a narrative presenting the Ricardian Socialists as the pioneers of a theory of surplus-value set against the capitalist system which deprived workers of the fruits of their labour. Therefore, they saw themselves as the heirs to this "British school".<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the students considered they had surpassed their masters. As someone who promoted gradual and pacific social change deriving from the local success of co-operative communities, Thompson did not escape Marx and Engels's critique of the so-called "utopian" socialism, with its rejection of more political and revolutionary means of action—a critique particularly levelled against Saint-Simon, Fourier and Owen.

Therefore, the posterity of Thompson's writings has known an almost paradoxical double dynamic. On the one hand, the huge impact of Marx's ideas—which were explicitly developed in keeping with but also against authors like Thompson—has led to his invisibilisation. But on the other hand, it is precisely because Thompson influenced Marx and Engels that subsequent academic works came to be interested in him. Early studies were thus informed by an initial interest in Marx's thought, and Thompson's was consequently seen

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<sup>3</sup> It was notably in the perspective to mock Proudhon's "lack of originality" or to disarm Karl Robertus' accusations of plagiarism against Marx that they insisted on recreating an intellectual genealogy that would demonstrate that the concept of surplus-value and the defence of the workers' right to enjoy the full product of their labour already existed in the 1820s in Great Britain.

either as a confirmation or as an alternative to it.. The same can be said about intellectuals who examined Thompson's feminist thought: the first ones to rehabilitate him sought an alternative to what Marxism had to offer in terms of gender equality. In her remarkable book *Eve and the New Jerusalem* (1983) about the place given to feminism in the Owenite movement, Barbara Taylor showed that Marxism subordinated the emancipation of women to class struggle and conditioned the improvement of their status to a long-awaited revolution, whereas Owenism targeted any type of social hierarchy, including the gender-based ones.

Therefore, though Thompson's political, economic and social thought has never really fallen into oblivion after his death, it was only with the Second wave of feminism and the emergence of gender studies that the *Appeal* truly started to catch the attention of scholars. When Thompson was alive, his radical economic ideas and his religious scepticism had put him at odds with the dominant perceptions of his day, and his feminism greatly added to this. It is, after all, by reading extracts from his critique of marriage that his family's lawyer attempted to prove that Thompson simply was insane, in order to secure his inheritance. Nowadays, the *Appeal* is Thompson's most studied text, and for a reason: It is one of the first publications in history to defend women's right to vote and to include without concession nor ambiguity the improvement of their condition in the search for political progress. In comparison, the Chartists and Socialists that came after him remained more hesitant to take a stand on the issue—before movements fighting for women's suffrage finally embraced the cause in the late XIX<sup>th</sup> century.

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## Further reading

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