

“HOW must I live now?” This was a question George Eliot had been repeatedly asked by women readers. The famous novelist provided a response with *Middlemarch*, which first appeared, serially, in 1871-72. In sensitive detail, specimens were provided of how women (and men) worked through the relationship between their aspirations and the social pressures that bore down on them.¹ Six years earlier, in a far-away market town in north-west England, an intelligent, literate 35-year-old mother of three young sons began facing this fundamental question in an unusual form. In 1865, following her husband’s sudden death from a stroke, Mrs Roseanne Hart Bigg (as she was then) became the owner of the weekly newspaper *Soulby’s Ulverston Advertiser and General Intelligencer*. She was to be so for at least 32 years during a period when “all aspects of women’s life – economic, political, social, educational, sexual – came under scrutiny, revealing deep-seated discontents and resentments on the one hand and male fears and prejudices on the other”.² Her sole imprint finished in 1897. By this time improvements had been made in the situation of women, more especially those in the middle classes. However, if “masculine superiority” in society had been given a number of jolts, it remained firmly in place.

This study’s argument is twofold.

First, that Mrs Bigg, a Conservative, was, or more accurately, learned to become, a feminist in orientation and a suffragist. Women’s suffrage remains a significant area of historical enquiry, as the recent publication of a “revisionist analysis” underscores.³ Her story helps to confirm the wrongness of viewing suffrage history “solely and simply through the dictates and policies and practices of the ‘centre’”,⁴ and as a platform for famous names. For all the claims of heterogeneity, she does not register among those women Caine has called the “less prominent” who have been surfacing recently in the study of feminism and suffrage history.⁵ Her story remains hidden in the annals of her own sex. Yet it adds a regional challenge to the traditional view locating English feminism within liberal, radical, and eventually socialist perspectives.⁶ Moreover, from within a business (and therefore male) setting, it also bears on the question of the role of men. Even as late as the beginning of this the 21st century, it is said “they are still somewhat marginalized within narratives of suffrage history”,⁷ although the search for answers is being stimulated.⁸

Second, in a further and unique expansion of what we now know to be the intricacies of Victorian women’s thinking and behaviour,⁹ her public role bears in interesting ways on the interface between the “woman question” and what went on “backstage” in the production of Victorian provincial newspapers. Wiener, noting that “the difficulties in reconstructing the authoritative/private side of Victorian newspapers are overwhelming”, urges rightly that “it is imperative we become more knowledgeable about the human element behind journalism”.¹⁰ Mrs Bigg gives us an

unusual opportunity to do this – and not simply in relation to the suffrage dimension. Women’s thinking has been seriously neglected at the *regional* level in England. She was not the only female newspaper proprietor. “Journalism”, writes Brown, “was exceptional and noteworthy in its employment of women”: it was an “open’ pursuit”.¹¹ However, examination of some significant recent books on the Victorian newspaper press does not suggest women were much in evidence in editorial chairs or as publishers.¹² Yet there has been a long if thin tradition of female newspaper ownership in England. During Mrs Bigg’s early life, at least three women in the country “inherited, as widows, prosperous newspapers”.¹³ In 1865, according to *Mitchell’s Press Directory*, just over a dozen women owned a provincial newspaper. A final point here. The relationship between Mrs Bigg and the authorship of her newspaper’s editorials cannot be delineated with certainty. There is no evidence that proves that she dictated what was published or wrote herself. This raises difficulties which will be addressed as the argument develops.

Chivalric rescue, rites and responsibilities

A gentleman’s daughter, born at Clyst St. Mary’s, near Exeter, Devon, Miss Roseanne Hart Pridham married John Stanyan Bigg, a draper’s son, in Carlisle in 1852. Her adopted home, Ulverston, even with the coming of a railway in the 1850s and proximity to the vigorously new industrial town of Barrow, was then somewhat dull and sluggish. Its population had almost stood still at around 7,000 inhabitants.¹⁴ She lived in what a contemporary was to describe, aptly, as Ulverston’s “small social world”.¹⁵ Her husband stood out on two counts. First, by 1865 he had been the owner-editor of *Soulby’s Ulverston Advertiser & General Intelligencer* for two years, having taken it over on the bankruptcy of its founder, the printer Stephen Soulby. Bigg had been its original editor and was in his second spell in the chair. Second, he was the centre of what his friend, the fellow writer, and Presbyterian minister, George Gilfillan, described in the *Dundee Advertiser* as a “highly intelligent circle”. Bigg was to gain entry, as a minor poet, to the *Dictionary of National Biography*. It is in his fantasies that we can catch elusive glimpses of his wife as an intelligent as well as beautiful sweetheart and later spotless wife and mother, keen to listen to his inventive narrative as she sat at her “customary work”. His picturing of his home in Hoad Terrace, beneath Hoad Hill, Ulverston, as a haven of comfort and simple, happy domesticity is confirmed by Gilfillan’s observations: Bigg’s “house was the home of hospitality and peace”.¹⁶ “Amiable” is the only adjective describing Mrs Bigg discoverable in the documentary as opposed to the “literary” record. It was a label tagged on her by a male – Gilfillan, again. No better adjective could have been chosen to conjure up a nice person: sweet, obliging, and lovable. Equally, no more commonplace a word could in those days have been selected to “hide” her.

Her husband’s extended family was well regarded. Her father-in-law was a respected preacher, of somewhat ecumenical tastes, who put his words into practice.¹⁷ In addition to her three sons, Mrs Bigg had three brothers-in-law: two were employed in the steel works at Barrow and one was a bank manager in Ulverston. Her mother-in-law had died in 1855; Bigg’s sister, at 19, six years earlier.

The suddenness of Bigg’s death after a short illness at 36 was a profound blow to his family and friends. We cannot know how much knowledge she had before her

husband's death of the financial health and prospects of the *Ulverston Advertiser*. Branca informs us that "the work load in the middle-class home demanded full participation from the house-wife . . ." ¹⁸ While he was alive, therefore, Mrs Bigg had plenty to think about. However, as a widow there was "the terrible economic problem: how could a woman – let alone a woman with dependent children – make an independent livelihood?" ¹⁹ A subscription fund organised by another of Bigg's friends helped ensure she kept the newspaper. Here is an illustrative example of that "chivalric rescue" to which she was entitled according to the terms of Victorian "sexual politics". ²⁰

Because of her peculiar situation, widowhood meant that not only did Mrs Bigg have to undergo one of the rites of passage time demands of many individuals, but a "rite of institution", too. ²¹ In her case, the latter, because it was not going to happen to them, involved her in passing over a "line" which disconnected her from all other women in her town (and almost all in her country). Widows were, and are, regarded differently to wives, but she also took on a role that further changed how people had to look at her, and one which demanded the performance of certain duties. Reluctantly or not, if she was to have "self-respect" as well as to be "respectable", she had to act to some degree as a newspaper proprietor. This was to require public engagement with ideas about masculinity and femininity.

Victorian feminists, it has been said, found it "almost impossible" to escape the all-encompassing frame in which men marked out women's socio-political boundaries and what their thoughts ought to be. ²² Howarth rightly notes the instability of such limits, ²³ but how much harder for someone in Mrs Bigg's position to reassess her life. From a feminist perspective, she had three options: submission to patriarchal mores ("Let the men who are around me take over and make decisions for me"); insurrection ("I'm taking over the direction and running of the business"); or a stance somewhere in between and one that could be variable over time. ²⁴ Whatever choice was made, in a patriarchal culture she would – as a *woman* – remain "an outsider". ²⁵ In 1865 and for some years afterwards, only the first option made domestic and economic sense. She was no Mrs Jellyby forgetful of her children's interests in the pursuit of any public cause. At the time of the 1891 Census all Mrs Bigg's sons (aged 33, 31, and 27) were with her. This suggests familial intimacy and the importance to her of domesticity, just as did the (1865) judgement by her first husband's friend of the happy quality of her home. Initially, in that year, her responsibilities extended beyond her children: her father-in-law – who lived next door – did not long survive his son, dying in 1868 after a substantial period of having been house-bound. At some point during the next six years she thought seriously of remarrying, and did so in 1874 (when her youngest child was 10). Her second husband was much older than she was; 67-year-old retired merchant and widower Thomas Jefferson. Although "a warm supporter" of the Bible Society and Christian missions abroad, he had "a somewhat retiring disposition" and "took no part in the strife of local politics". A poet, his great interest was literature. The marriage lasted for ten years until his death. ²⁶

However immersed in the Victorian "domestic ideology" she may have been, to one *indispensable* man, in his dual role of employee and close relative, she was not and could never be an "outsider". This was her first husband's first cousin, John Gorell Blacklock, who proved a lasting and solid support to Bigg's widow. Six years

older than Mrs Jefferson (as I am now going to call her), he had been an apprentice printer in Ulverston; an emigrant to Australia where he had brothers; and subsequently a printer in Yorkshire. Blacklock had been working for a solicitor in the town when Bigg had invited him to join the newspaper when he took it over from Soulby. Blacklock remained as general manager of the *Ulverston Advertiser* until the later 1890s. His role raises questions which we will consider later. “The existence of strong male support for feminist objectives is one of the striking characteristics of Victorian feminist agitation”, although this had a downside in that such men “showed a strong tendency to want to take control of the women’s movement out of the hands of women”.²⁷

The newspaper’s survival was not a certainty. Any assessment of Mrs Jefferson’s contribution to the “woman question” in late Victorian society must make this clear. She and Blacklock could never believe of her *Ulverston Advertiser* as was stated correctly, albeit fictionally, of a certain Five Towns print, “that nothing would ever be able to stand up against the *Signal*”.²⁸ Ulverston was never *her* paper’s possession.

By 1869, the then arch-rival, the *Ulverston Mirror*, was claiming weekly sales of 2,000 copies. This figure in itself would probably not have been a major concern of Bigg’s widow and her manager, for Victorian commerce and “puffery” were closely associated.²⁹ “The groundwork of advertising is romance”, it was stated about the time of the *Ulverston Mirror*’s assertion. “*Vestigia nulla retrorsum*. No print points the other way”.³⁰ The real commercial threat, suggesting the *Ulverston Mirror*’s reasonably sound health, was (as they knew well) its continuing presence. Throughout her lengthy ownership Mrs Jefferson had at least one consistent Ulverston journalistic threat. Initially (in 1865) this was the five-year-old *Ulverston Mirror*, but there was every possibility of other rivals, especially because divisions within political parties fermented below the provincial press.³¹ It had only been “yesterday” that the *Ulverston and Furness Star* (1863) and the *Ulverston and Furness Times* (1864) had been published, albeit lasting only a few weeks in each case. Two later entrants into the market fared a little better, and two others proved much more serious competitors. The *Ulverston Sun* appeared for seven months in 1874 – the last year in which she was Mrs Bigg; the *North Lonsdale Express* appeared in 1886, lasting for ten months; and in 1895 the *North Lonsdale Herald* was published, surviving until 1910. More seriously still, in 1883 the *Ulverston News* (the local edition of Samuel Schofield Lord’s *Barrow News*) appeared. This ultimately absorbed the *Ulverston Mirror* (then the *North Lonsdale Mirror*) in 1886 and was to continue long into the 20th century.³²

During her proprietorship, other Furness and South Lakeland newspapers, to a greater or lesser extent, restricted the *Ulverston Advertiser*’s penetration into the surrounding district (e.g. *Barrow Herald and Furness Advertiser*; the *Advertiser* and the *Gazette* in Millom; the *Westmorland Gazette and Kendal Advertiser*; the *Lakes Chronicle* and the *Lakes Herald*). It claimed to circulate “extensively in the Agricultural and Mining localities of North Lonsdale and North Lancashire generally – particularly in High and Low Furness, Cartmel, &c. Also in Millom, and the Lakes (*sic*) Districts of Lancashire, Cumberland, and Westmorland”.³³ Such claims need to be considered with this competition in mind. More than in any other form, in their multiplicity the provincial newspapers remind us now that “paper . . . marked the advance of (Victorian) urbanism just as surely as the output of iron

marked the advance of industry”.³⁴ They were also constant reminders to contemporaries then that newspaper publishing was a business gamble.

Targeted to readers in the higher social classes, the *Ulverston Advertiser* claimed nevertheless to disseminate among “all classes”. In its early years in the 1850s (when it had a monopoly and could more easily chance political neutrality) it had succeeded in attracting working-class contributions to both correspondence and advertising columns. By the 1870s, during a “literary storm” in which the reputation as a poet and novelist of John Stanyan Bigg was impugned, Mrs Jefferson’s paper was described in the *Ulverston Mirror* as “that Clerical and Conservative print”.³⁵ It periodically claimed independence of mind (a common newspaper trait) but, discussing women’s suffrage on 13 May 1880, it spoke out “as Conservatives”. To remain healthy meant broadening her paper’s appeal, which in turn involved attracting more lower-class readers: owners could not expect simply to coast.³⁶ In 1885 Mrs Jefferson invested in new machinery; to broaden her papers appeal and attract more customers, she dropped the price by a halfpenny to 2d, and brought out a penny Saturday edition called the *North Lonsdale Advertiser*, “thus bringing the *Advertiser* within the reach of all classes”.³⁷ It was a response to change: by this time, thanks to the building of the North Lonsdale Ironworks eleven years earlier there were more people living in Ulverston.³⁸

The week after her last sole imprint (around which time Blacklock retired) the *Ulverston Advertiser* was published by Soulby’s Ulverston Advertiser Co. Ltd. Perhaps this reflected not so much change of ownership but financial caution. During the second half of the nineteenth century more newspapers appear to have adopted “corporate form, and by the turn of the century even the old family businesses were doing this as a commercial safeguard”.³⁹ In the absence of records it is not possible to say. Further changes occurred. On 19 April 1900, the *Ulverston Advertiser* was printed for the proprietors by R. H. Jefferson and Sons Ltd. By 1906 the *Ulverston Advertiser* was being “Printed and published by the Proprietors, Paton and Parker, Limited”, of Ramsden Square, Barrow.⁴⁰ Between these dates, in 1903, Alfred P. Bigg, the youngest son – the only one who was a printer (but not a journalist) – died. Mrs Jefferson followed, aged 79, in 1909. No obituary of her appears to have been published in the local press. She had outlived Blacklock by five years. The newspaper itself continued until 6 August 1914.

Because of J. S. Bigg’s connection with the beginnings of the *Ulverston Advertiser* his and subsequently his widow’s take-over of it, and his cousin’s participation, we have here a (limited) version of “a modest newspaper dynasty” such as Fraser has shown was established by the Suttons in Nottingham or the Thompsons in Leicester, and – even more celebrated – the Baines family of Leeds.⁴¹ Of Bigg’s other sons, the eldest became a civil engineer; his second a solicitor. John Stanyan Bigg himself had been far more a literary gentleman than an “editor as activist” so his legacy did not include a politically inspiring tradition to energize the younger generation to use the paper as a “platform”. Romantics may regret that Mrs Jefferson did not have a daughter!

She did not edit her newspaper. It is unclear at times who did. Even when a name is documented the individual may be indistinguishable. The cautionary touch to Lee’s judgement that “editors and journalists of provincial papers were likely to be

well-known to their readers”,⁴² serves to emphasize Wieners point that “not only are we ignorant of the detailed histories of many of these papers, but we often lack information about most of the key people connected with them”.⁴³ We cannot rule out Blacklock’s own participation as a kind of editorial factotum: the census of 1871 says of his occupation simply, “Newspaper office”, but in the censuses of 1881 and 1891 he is described as a reporter. The official may have got it wrong, or may have known more than we do about the extent of the general manager’s responsibilities. Perhaps “managing editor” sums it up. One fact is clear. Taking the period of her proprietorship as a whole, it is Blacklock who is crucial to Mrs Jefferson. This is not to neglect the politically Conservative J. Roper Robinson, a churchman, who was her last editor – from 1887 to 1897. Robinson would have come to understand what Mrs Jefferson was interested in and how her views changed because, before taking the editorial chair, he had been, as a loyal and valuable employee, connected with the paper since Soulby’s time. Over many years – which included the transitional period during which the paper’s views on the woman question were gradually reshaped – his earlier roles were considerable less senior than Blacklock’s. Robinson had been apprentice compositor, compositor, sub-editor and in addition collector, a job that took him out of town for two periods each year. His specialism became agriculture and he wrote for a variety of journals, as his obituary in the newspaper of 27 February 1908, makes clear. Blacklock, himself, owed his connection with the *Ulverston Advertiser* not to Soulby but to Mrs Jefferson’s first husband; he had throughout her proprietorship the ultimate responsibility for looking after Mrs Jefferson’s interests in the business; was in regular and frequent contact with her from the start; was, indeed, her link with her employees; and, above all, was ‘family’.

To what extent was she a “hands-on” publisher? It is difficult to say because she appears to have left so few overt traces of herself. We can, however, consider the law. “Being an editor, unlike being a virgin”, it has been said, “could be a matter of degree”.⁴⁴ It would be thoroughly incautious to transfer this observation in an uncomplicated way to being a Victorian newspaper proprietor.⁴⁵ “Sovereignty” lay with owners.⁴⁶ According to English law an editor, because he was “simply the agent of the proprietor, it follows that he can have no power, as against the proprietor”.⁴⁷

Whoever, during Mrs Jefferson’s long proprietorship, actually penned the leading articles would always have been aware that she would read her newspaper. Indeed, she was *the* reader above all others. Nor must we think that because someone wrote a leader it necessarily meant belief in what was written: adherence to such a principle would have meant lost jobs.⁴⁸ Mrs Jefferson’s opinions could not be ignored. Moreover, employees would be aware that her family, friends, acquaintances, and business folk would talk to her (and Blacklock) about what appeared in her newspaper. Given the particular nature of the “authoritative/private” dimension of the *Ulverston Advertiser* that we do know about, in the way its editing worked in practice, it may have been “combinatorial” in some form.⁴⁹

Mrs Jefferson was not “a sleeping proprietor”; such a person “was very rare indeed”.⁵⁰ Each week a copy was put on one side for her. Written in ink were the words: “John G. Blacklock for Mrs Roseanne Hart Bigg (then Jefferson) of . . .” – first Hoad Terrace, but later, among other homes, the most impressive, Stanyan Lodge. Simply expressed as it is, this inscription signals that it was not a delivery boy but her indispensable man who brought it on his way home from the Gill⁵¹ to

(initially) his own Sunderland Terrace home. When she talked to him about her paper, its content and future plans; when she discussed the need for and cost of new equipment such as the new printing machine in 1885; when she considered issues of the day; or when an employment issue caused distress,⁵² her home became part of the printing office in the Gill. If, as Churchwell notes, the historians Chase and Levenson “disclose a complex economy of public and private that transversed Victorian life”,⁵³ Mrs Jefferson’s situation reflects this dramatically: home for her certainly could never be an imagined exclusively private world.

Suffrage and identity

Victorian newspapers were not produced for us. As we sit today in record office or reference library, we need to remember that a newspaper “is not a window on to the past or even a mirror of it. Each article, each periodical number, was and is part of a complex process in which writers, editors, publishers, and readers engaged in trying to understand themselves and their society: that is, they struggled to make their world meaningful”.⁵⁴ This theoretical observation by Beetham is part of a new understanding of how we should “read” Victorian newspapers.⁵⁵ It is exemplified by the case of Mrs Jefferson and the *Ulverston Advertiser’s* changing views on women’s suffrage. The word “struggle” is used by Beetham “because in modern societies the processes of making meaning – both individually and socially – are difficult and cut across by conflict”.⁵⁶

It seems applicable to Mrs Jefferson, who, we will see, was seeking to break bounds, provided that we detach from this observation any connotations of stridency and excitability: that we interpret it as being about facing up to the implications of her public position; and that we do not too readily assume that the expression of particular opinions in her paper was for her a straightforward or easy matter. She was a “respectable” lady, a mother with three sons; and her second husband, it is clear, from age, disposition, and interests was unlikely to have welcomed any atmospherics. Understanding women and men and their relationships then (as now) means being attentive to the notion of a continuum.⁵⁷ “Nineteenth-century women were not always the passive, submissive and pure creations of popular idealizations, but neither were they ever completely free from this stereotype. Its most persuasive and effective form of control was through the social and individual demand for respectability. While we can now judge Victorian women to have been more varied, active, and complex than previously considered, we must not create a new stereotype that ignores the limits within which the Victorians lived and changed. Rather, we should recognize the struggle to achieve independence – economic and personal – within the framework of traditional values as being a hallmark of the times”.⁵⁸ This assessment by Vicinus is of particular relevance to Mrs Jefferson: newspaper ownership did not, could not, immediately restructure her thinking.

Voting “remained the most important symbolic and political issue of the nineteenth-century women’s movement, . . .”.⁵⁹ It was argued not that long ago that seeking the vote for women was “the red herring of the (sexual) revolution” during its initial (Victorian) stage.⁶⁰ Such a view gives too much weight, wrongly, to what seemed to have been suffragist failure, particularly in the last two decades of the nineteenth century.⁶¹ In a new collection of papers published in 2000, the editors

Eustance, Ryan, and Ugolini, after pointing out that “suffrage history is enjoying a renaissance in Britain”, note that although their collective focus starts from the 1880s, “recent research has demonstrated how a great deal can be added to understandings of histories of women’s suffrage and to concepts of citizenship and rights in Britain by exploring the motivating forces and the ideas articulated by women and men active much earlier in the nineteenth century”.⁶² This present study of a provincial female newspaper proprietor, covering her life during the 1850s to 1890s, underscores these authors’ opposition to what they call “proscriptive boundaries” regarding suffrage history.⁶³ It is significant that around the time Mrs Bigg was thinking of remarrying, a leading feminist, Mrs Josephine Butler, during her battle against the 1864, 1866, and 1869 Contagious Diseases Acts, was, in 1873, coming to realise that the franchise was “a more urgent matter than (she) once thought”⁶⁴ and the strength of her conviction increased in the years that followed.⁶⁵ For Mrs Jefferson, herself, female suffrage certainly became the most specifically insistent dimension of “the woman question”.

Mrs Jefferson’s thinking, as proprietor, went through several stages: a seven-year period when a traditional masculine line was upheld confidently and instinctively by her paper; the middle and later 1870s when a liberalisation of her views was clearly under way; the 1880s and 1890s when we can picture the convinced if frustrated Conservative woman of property and intelligence; and finally, in that last decade, circumspect consideration of more far-reaching possibilities.

In the later 1860s, the *Ulverston Advertiser* described a woman in terms traditionally used by men: as “differing wholly and essentially in her mental, as much as in her physical constitution. Her modes of thought are different (to those of men)”.⁶⁶ Not surprisingly, therefore, the *Ulverston Advertiser* made no mention of women on the four occasions in 1866 when it commented on proposals that were to enfranchise the urban working man in 1867.⁶⁷ This was the year when the ladies of the Kensington Society “drafted a petition – the first of its kind – asking for the enfranchisement of all householders, without distinction of sex, who possess such property or rental qualification as your Honourable House may determine”.⁶⁸

In 1867 (during which year J. S. Mill argued strongly in the debates on the Reform Bill that women should get the vote), an error gave Mrs Lily Maxwell, a shopkeeper, the chance to vote in a Manchester by-election. In that year another Manchester woman, Lydia Becker, had formed the National Society for Women’s Suffrage: “the movement was respectable, well-to-do, and dominated by a handful of middle-class leaders”.⁶⁹ Becker, whose politics were Liberal, was its leader for 23 years. She took Mrs Maxwell to vote.⁷⁰ This was not the way for women to behave, according to the *Ulverston Advertiser*. “Lily Maxwell has no doubt earned the goodwill of her sex in having led the way to the polling booth”, it pointed out, “but is not all this wordy eloquence a beginning at the wrong end of reform? Are not our houses and homes a far more profitable investment for our spare energy?”⁷¹

Political progress was made by women. In 1869 they got the municipal franchise; and, following the arrangements for a state system of elementary education introduced in 1870, they could vote in elections for the school boards that were to administer state elementary schools. This latter caused Mrs Jefferson’s paper of 8 December 1870, to refer in waggish terms to “the different happy families – which include ladies and all the other elements of discord . . .”. Two years later, the

Ulverston Advertiser observed on 9 May 1872 that women were “far more attractive in the domestic circle than when spouting on a public platform”; it could not stand “strong-minded spinsters, who, having few or no domestic duties can afford to stump the country in support of their particular views . . .”. Anti-suffragists may have “disliked agitators”, but “they particularly disliked female agitators”,⁷² as Brian Harrison has pointed out. Becker’s National Society for Women’s Suffrage, getting up petitions and arranging for MPs to present bills in the Commons, would not succeed even in achieving voting rights limited to women of property. But it was notable for keeping the issue bubbling.⁷³ Noting that “the same names” were appearing repeatedly, the *Ulverston Advertiser* selected some arguments to refute.

Female advice could be put into effect irrespective of women being given the vote, it said. That men were exclusively self-serving legislators could not be accepted. Women did not need the vote for wrongs to be ended. Violent behaviour towards wives was not good ground for giving women the vote. That while “an unmarried mother may lawfully claim the custody of her child, yet a married mother has not such right”, and that “all rights whatsoever over legitimate children are by English law reserved to their father”, were not good grounds. If wives did not get the vote then “spinsters must exercise the franchise on behalf of their married sisters and upon questions therefore of which they know little or nothing . . .”. If wives got the vote “instantly we have a fresh apple of discord cast into the domestic circle . . .”. If a wife took up the spouse’s views then having the vote would be a waste of time. The paper was afraid of this “social” dimension.

This defence by the *Ulverston Advertiser* of the status quo is worth analysis within the framework of “debate” on women at the time. J. F. C. Harrison reminds us that “opposition to women’s suffrage was not all mindless and bigoted misogyny”. Belief in the idea that men and women had separate spheres was far from confined to the former: no less than seventeen years after its own (ultimately provisional) position was made clear by the *Ulverston Advertiser*, purchasers of the journal *Nineteenth Century* in June, 1889, could read of over a hundred *noted* women appealing “against Female Suffrage”, with almost twenty times as many additional signatures appearing in August.⁷⁴ Many of the female readers of the *Ulverston Advertiser* would have been prepared to accept the status quo as far as the franchise was concerned. There were, therefore, sound marketing reasons (publishers usually try not to offend readers), as well as some logic, in the arguments the *Ulverston Advertiser* was using (theoretically, all husbands could be influenced by the views of their wives). But the paper was itself selecting its opponents’ arguments; it was not (and this was three years after Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* had been published in 1869) giving and challenging their opponents’ best arguments. Thus it did not consider the relationship between its arguments, that men were not exclusively self-serving legislators, with the existence of the Contagious Diseases Acts introduced in the previous decade and raising anxiety among (some) men as well as women.⁷⁵ Its point that violence towards wives was not a good ground for giving women the vote did not lead to even a question as to whether or not divorce ought therefore to become easier: “there can be little check to brutality consistent with leaving the victim still in the power of the executioner”, Mill had written.⁷⁶ The paper’s description of a vote granted to women as “a fresh apple of discord” suggested a view of marital disharmony as a norm,

which may have had some truth in it but was not the paper's intention! Its drawing of a distinction between spinsters and wives unfavourable to the former (because of their ignorance of wifely matters) is more understandable for it is only "by the 1880s (that) spinsterhood was beginning to be seen as a positive condition, allowing freedom of action often denied to married women".⁷⁷ Ironically, the *Ulverston Advertiser's* complacent belief in 1872, that "the good sense of the wives and mothers of England" would "we doubt not consign the whole question to oblivion", was already proving insecure.

In the absence of letters or diaries, chronology becomes especially important. At the very end of 1872 the traditional male view of women as expressed in the *Ulverston Advertiser* was no longer fully acceptable to Mrs Jefferson. It is fitting, if perhaps merely coincidental, that the serial publication by Blackwood of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* had been completed between December 1871, and December 1872. To 1872, despite her more "elevated" position as a newspaper proprietor, Mrs Jefferson was – on the evidence of her paper's leading articles – one of the generality of women who accepted what men said. Many years after this time, Josephine Butler wrote that she saw "a tendency even among the best (by whom she meant those of a more independent turn of mind) to knock under too much to *male* opinion".⁷⁸ If *activists* were likely to submit after women had been recording important achievements, what could be expected up to the early 1870s of someone like the *amiable* Mrs Jefferson? The contradiction between Mrs Jefferson's personal situation – and more importantly her consciousness of it – and her newspaper's expressed viewpoint, was undermining the confidence with which the latter could be held. There was no dramatic overnight change but she clearly had, as her paper confessed on 26 December 1872, nearly become a "convert". The wobbling is clear. Women had "palpable grievances", declared the *Ulverston Advertiser*, nevertheless it maintained that the vote was no "specific for their troubles". It conceded that women had "a certain amount of argument on their side". It then agreed with a point, "conveyed in a letter from a fair correspondent to a leading contemporary" – "the right of *property* to representation should not be forfeited by the accident of a woman being in possession".

The *Ulverston Advertiser* noted that women now voted in town council elections and in school board elections; indeed, women were serving on school boards. It "very freely" agreed that "hundreds" were "by their education, common sense, and general intelligence . . . better qualified . . . than hundreds of men who now enjoy the privilege". Nevertheless – and the newspaper willingly accepted the charge of "inconsistency" or "prejudice" – giving women the vote was "distasteful". It offered a solution: it wanted "the women of England unanimously" to say that they wanted to take up "public life". Brian Harrison has pointed out that the "ultimate weapon" of those opposed to the suffragettes "remained the referendum . . . Antis believed that here the public would endorse their position".⁷⁹ It was not simply a referendum that was required: the *Ulverston Advertiser* (at least) wanted a *unanimous* verdict. It certainly did not want "a woman in the gravest council in the world". Such a result was a "dire possibility".

The wobbling continued but realignment was coming. On 3 February 1876, a man's poem, "Woman's Rights", reprinted from the *Carlisle Journal* pushed the separate sphere's line: "Sway thou the sceptre o'er the heart and home". But 18

May saw a powerful feminist letter, and on 22 June a Scottish working-class spinster, visiting Ulverston, was praised in a report as having “ably advocated” women’s rights.

Four years later, on 13 May 1880, the *Ulverston Advertiser* in commenting on a women’s suffrage meeting in London, was praising the suffragists’ “logical reasoning”. Mrs Jefferson’s print rapped the knuckles of the Conservative London newspapers, the *Standard* and the *Daily Telegraph* – although their “sophistry” and “idle banter” was deemed “good-natured”. The *Ulverston Advertiser* declared that “we have not yet seen any good or really rational argument” in opposition to the suffragist position. Women, it said, “as well as men, have wealth and intelligence; and are called upon to pay rates and taxes, in consequence of their being owners or representatives of property. The ‘weakness of their sex’ has not shielded them from an equal payment of local and Parliamentary burdens”. Boards of guardians and school boards had not been inconvenienced because of women’s votes. “If women are competent to discuss the fitness of such candidates, why not competent to discuss the fitness of parliamentary candidates? . . . Has not our sovereign Lady the Queen to do with politics? . . . Away with such idle, puerile nonsense, as that the ‘female mind’ is so weak, so little, and so contracted, that it is wholly incapable of grasping or understanding anything connected with politics, and the common weal of England”.

Envisioning possible (adverse) outcomes could not be accepted: “We must look at the facts as they are”. As with Lydia Becker, Mrs Jefferson’s plea was for “only . . . such as exercise an electoral vote at present, on other occasions, by virtue of their position as property owners, or householders; the same being either spinsters or widows”. Her paper met the fear that “women would become dreadful politicians, and thus be forced out of” the sphere to which they correctly belonged: “. . . are they not politicians now? Is it not because they are so to a great extent, that such a meeting was held . . . Did not women take an active part in the late General Election? Is there any danger that they will be more political, if . . . they are admitted to their share of the suffrage? We think not”.

Mrs Jefferson’s new stance was reflected in what was *not* said as well as what was said. An editorial on “The National Training School of Cookery” on 22 April 1874 (nine years into her proprietorship and the year she remarried) had taken a strict “separate spheres” line: “woman would better fulfil her mission by studying domestic rather than political economy”. No such statement appeared in an editorial on “The Science of Cookery” on 25 November 1880 (when she was still a remarried woman). The absence of the separatist sentiment is telling.

That rural working men, who got the vote in 1884, “may have an opportunity of studying Politics”, was one reason why a penny Saturday edition of the *Ulverston Advertiser* was brought out in that year. The irony of this boon for the newly enfranchised being provided by a wealthy and intelligent representative of the unenfranchised was unlikely to escape Mrs Jefferson – or any Conservative suffragist.⁸⁰ The previous year, 1883, the *Ulverston Advertiser* had suggested, on 25 October, that “the improvement of trade” was more important to the rural workman than his enfranchisement. Shortly afterwards, it also claimed, on 15 November, that “the country people” were unenthusiastic for the vote. However, this claim about rural lack of enthusiasm for the vote was more likely a delusion attributable in part to the fact that the rural labourer’s “politics . . . remained something of a mystery”,

as Mingay has pointed out, although “land” worked him up.⁸¹ It was also the result in part of the frustration that Mrs Jefferson was feeling.

In the early 1880s, the *Ulverston Advertiser* concluded that property was the key, “sentiment” was the problem, i.e. male consciousness and reality had not gelled. Female “householders have a much stronger claim . . .” than rural working man, it declared on 24 April 1884. “The owners or occupiers of property, who pay their due share of taxes and rates, the very qualification which entitles anyone to vote, are the only ones who are asking to be enrolled . . . It is purely a property qualification, either by ownership or occupation, or both, and we cannot see either justice or logic in confining such qualification to one sex only”. In the intimacy of a small provincial market town, Mrs Jefferson could hardly have avoided seeing regularly the prospective rural voters. She was not impressed by their readiness. Voting was being “thrust upon them . . .”. Her frustration and irritation is evident in her newspaper’s comments: it indicated that she herself owned an indispensable part of the very constitution of the country: “If the property carry with it responsibility, and gives a real interest in the well-being of the country, if it be one of the corner stones upon which the constitution of this country is built then can fairness and the simple recognition of what is right and sound deny that the franchise ought to be given to such women as are duly qualified to exercise (*sic*) it?” The argument (not confined to the *Ulverston Advertiser* or to the suffrage issue) that newspapers were part of the constitution was quite false. The year 1850 (two years before the former Miss Pridham married Bigg) saw the publication of F. K. Hunt’s *The Fourth Estate: Contributions Towards a History of Newspapers, and the Liberty of the Press*. This was “the first major attempt” at suggesting an interpretation of the history of the press.⁸² However, whatever journalists thought, the law was clear enough:

The press was no fourth estate of the realm but a branch of commerce, though one with unusual potential for political mischief.⁸³

The *Ulverston Advertiser* editorial then went from the particular (Mrs Jefferson’s situation) to the general (that of the female householders): “The education and intelligence, as well as the social position of great numbers of women demand fair treatment at the hands of the country”. Women were being denied “simply and solely because they are women”. This was an over-simplification by the *Ulverston Advertiser*. It was more the case that such women as Mrs Jefferson were older and wealthier, than that they were women, that lessened the chances of their winning Liberal Party enthusiasm for their views. The Liberals thought (no doubt rightly) that these women would prefer the Conservatives. As the Liberals saw it, to back the position advocated by Mrs Jefferson was not the way to win votes. This, argues Fulford, “was certainly never understood by the women”.⁸⁴ Indeed, the *Ulverston Advertiser* itself bore out Fulford’s point: it actually admitted that it was unable to understand Gladstone’s neglect of women. A vote for women “would be the means, to a certain extent, of balancing the power to be distributed by the new Bill”, it declared on 24 April 1884. Brian Harrison has noted that “. . . the major attraction of equal franchise to Conservatives, . . . had always been the fact that it promised to reinforce the existing property-based electorate with a larger proportion of Conservative women than could ever be hoped for from an adult franchise

measure".⁸⁵ However, widening the franchise was not something most Conservatives – the party usually in power from 1885 until the turn of the century – had any desire for in any case, and they believed a partial measure to satisfy rich old ladies was but the thin end of the wedge.⁸⁶ "Since the Liberal leadership was also opposed to enfranchisement there was no need to follow Disraeli's tactic in 1867 of enfranchising working men in order to 'dish the Whigs'. The Conservatives could afford to ignore the issue and concentrate on other things".⁸⁷

Again and again, the *Ulverston Advertiser* voiced a pro-suffrage opinion.⁸⁸ For Mrs Jefferson, the irregularity of the franchise situation bit deeply: "It does seem an anomaly that a woman, a landed proprietor, a householder, in every respect qualified to exercise electoral privileges, qualified by education and intellect, should be denied the right to record her vote, whilst her coachman or gardener, living in her lodge, and possibly quite illiterate, should possess the privilege".

Such a complaint was intensified by an awareness of what the historian of public examinations in the second half of the nineteenth century has called "an intellectual revolution",⁸⁹ whose shock troops were those women who headed the examination lists at Cambridge University and whose success was duly noted by the *Ulverston Advertiser* on 30 August 1888. The message of these outstanding results was plain: women were not "inferior in intellect". In 1895 Mrs Jefferson's newspaper deemed the franchise issue "entirely one of intellect", adding caustically, "and surely the mistress will be as intellectual as her imperfectly-educated domestics".⁹⁰ This must be seen as representing a big change from the position taken a decade earlier when the principal criterion was seen to be the ownership of property.

Commenting on Faithfull Begg's Bill for a limited female franchise, the *Ulverston Advertiser*, on 11 February 1897, did not believe the time was ripe for votes for *all* women. However, its preference for a step-by-step approach was on the pragmatic ground that this was more certain to be successful: it was analogous to the history of male suffrage. Mrs Jefferson's newspaper had already reflected the fact that "by the 1890s some sections of the women's movement had begun to act upon their recognition that the platform developed by suffragists in the 1860s no longer suited an increasingly democratic age".⁹¹ Thus two years before hopes were raised by a 71 second-reading majority for Begg's Bill, the *Ulverston Advertiser*, on 31 October 1895, pointed out that, ". . . if we are drifting to the time when every male above the age of twenty-one years is to have the Parliamentary franchise, surely it would be only justice that every female should likewise have it". This is interpretable as approaching the backing of adult suffrage (the stance of "many Labour women").⁹² The dynamic, of course, was the "double standard". Only two years earlier, on 2 November 1893, it was envisioning female MPs "at no distant day". Mrs Jefferson had travelled a long way.

Targets other than the vote

Our exclusive focus thus far might suggest Mrs Jefferson was simply a selfish, singularly privileged middle-aged to elderly lady seeking to add the vote to her assets. However, the "rite of institution" she went through ultimately resulted in leading articles signalling an increasingly different outlook towards women to those

of the 1860s. Here, for her, was that “personal and experiential dimension of Victorian feminism” historians have emphasised.⁹³ Some examples will illustrate the range of her concerns.

She came out on the (ultimately) successful side in the war against the 1864, 1866, and 1869 acts against venereal disease. These struck at the disease through controls on prostitutes, not their clients, which exposed the system to charges which included double standards and the ensnaring of respectable women.⁹⁴ Mrs Jefferson’s print published a furious letter on 18 May 1876, from “An Indignant Woman” from Ulverston. This focused on a London newspaper report of a case in which the accused had resisted being examined medically and was sentenced to hard labour for 14 days. It was a loud – and permitted – remonstrance against state-legitimated and illiberal sexual assault.⁹⁵ “Only give women the right to vote in parliamentary elections, and this cursed law would be at once abrogated”, she wrote. “But our tyrants know this, and therefore audaciously withhold our just rights from us”. On 27 July, commenting upon a repeal move, the *Ulverston Advertiser* repeated its opposition to the legislation, expressed “about two years ago”, stating it to be founded “on injustice, cruelty, and immorality, and, in very many instances, atrociously enforced . . .”.

A case in which a constable was committed to the Old Bailey for how he dealt with a matchmaker (a dangerous but necessary job) elicited the rasp: “Policemen (we do not say all) look upon women as ‘only a woman’, and she is often treated by them worse than a dog”, it stated on 6 February 1879. Yet there were “many females” who, legitimately, had to walk the streets at night, indeed, had no choice but to do so. “We think magistrates, as we have said before, should be more careful in taking the evidence of police”. This criticism should not be seen as merely illustrative of a historian’s observation that “relations between the police and the press during the nineteenth century were uneven but predominantly fractious”:⁹⁶ it was about the *man* in policeman – and about women being violated. It also meant the crossing of class boundaries. When the *Ulverston Advertiser* was realigning itself on the issue of the female franchise, it was attacking a lack of male compassion in the execution of the law. On 23 January 1874, referring to proceedings at Middlesex Sessions and the Central Criminal Court, it observed: “Women, so far from meeting with mercy because they are women, are often punished, for this very reason (it would seem) with the greater severity”. The leader is emphatic: “. . . the plain fact comes before our eyes, . . . we are compelled to believe it”.

In the age of the railway, the isolation of train compartments and their lack of lighting were sources of widespread sexual anxiety. In 1875 in a case at Croydon Assizes, a colonel was successfully accused of indecent assault. The *Ulverston Advertiser* on 5 August described the complainant as a “brave and heroic young lady”; forfeiting feminine sentiments, she had acted “in the interests of her sex”. It is worth noting the use of the word “sex”: the paper was thinking beyond social class. Shortly after the Croydon case, the newspaper argued on 19 August for better “communication” on trains. Mrs Jefferson’s advocacy of improvements to rail safety, to benefit men as well as women – she had three sons remember – was underlined by a case heard at Whitehaven the following year: “. . . light in a tunnel is an absolute necessity, . . .” the *Ulverston Advertiser* thundered on 2 November.

In the 1880s, very different and independent female initiatives were

sympathetically treated by the *Ulverston Advertiser*. Lancashire “pit-brow” women in 1887 buttonholed the Home Secretary to try to save 6,000 jobs from a Mines Regulation Bill aimed to protect women. A long leading article on 19 May expressed, hardly surprisingly, many Conservative sentiments, but it is appropriate to reflect that the radical trade unionist Emma Paterson (who had died the previous year) – and the Liberal Josephine Butler – would have agreed with Mrs Jefferson’s denunciation of the “sickly sentimentality” of such laws, which could lead to men taking over women’s jobs – *and* with the explicit attention to the women’s viewpoint and understanding: *they* “know about it”; i.e. they were “rational” agents, as Butler, the Fawcetts, and Mill argued. Some feminists, Fabians and “social feminists” among them believed in “protection”, but, as Howarth notes on the issue of whose interests were best served by the limitation of women’s work, “the evidence is far from straightforward”.⁹⁷

In 1888, demands by wives to improve the Cheetham Reform Club, Manchester, to give families a better deal, were reported, and led the *Ulverston Advertiser* to condemn men’s “selfish attendance at club” – a widespread problem in Victorian and Edwardian England affecting all social classes⁹⁸ – by which “children are the principal sufferers”. Although the paper’s commentary on 26 April referred to husbands’ “neglect of duty at home, a shifting of responsibilities on to the already over-burthened shoulders of the weaker vessel”, tellingly it made no specific reference to the wives’ disclaimer that “we don’t want to be considered fit to sit in Parliament, make political speeches, conduct gigantic commercial transactions, nor anything which is considered unfeminine; . . .” and the suggested importance of “a few hours’ suitable recreation”. Unlike the wives, it mocked men as “the lords of creation”. Four months later, on 30 August, the *Ulverston Advertiser* identified the essential problem: women had to be unfettered from traditional mores.

Part at least of such liberation involved how men felt about their homes. Historians’ assessment of the value attached to “comfort” in influencing the relationships between the sexes, and its bearing on the “flight from domesticity”, is a matter of current debate.⁹⁹ Mrs Jefferson’s newspaper had, in the earlier 1880s, been engaged in pushing the joint responsibility of husbands and wives for easier and more pleasant homes. On 30 September 1880, while urging wives not to stick simply to “routine” household management but be more imaginative “in utilising the light, air, and water at her command”, the paper observed that husbands had to realise how important were “healthy, well-drained, well-ventilated houses, with plenty of pure air, pure water and wholesome food, . . .”. It was not just his wife’s job! On 5 May 1881, it argued that boys as well as girls should be educated to share “the decoration and beautification of their homes”.

Editorials in the 1890s are note-worthy for the range of foci relating to women’s issues. On 28 January 1892, Mrs Jefferson’s paper expressed itself forcefully against the public’s bad manners when it defended the “young ladies” behind Post Office counters. This was a response to criticisms published in the *London Standard*. The *Ulverston* paper referred also to “brainless idiots (who) can never enter an hotel bar without insulting the waitress”. On 14 April 1892, somewhat surprisingly for a Conservative paper, it was urging milliners and dressmakers to make a big combined effort to get a half-day off on Fridays. On 15 September, it was pleased more women

were supporting football matches. On 26 July 1894, it backed a proposal for a London exhibition “to celebrate the progress of the ingenuity and energy of women”. On 30 August 1894, it attacked work-shy and “callous” husbands, of whom Ulverston had a “fair number”. On 6 December 1894, it was encouraging local leisured ladies to join boards of guardians and school boards, singling out an exemplar in the local district.

In the 1890s, ten weeks before her last imprint, Mrs Jefferson’s newspaper condemned the situation in which men and women could do the same thing, but it was the women who suffered. “Why should the world condone in a man that which subjects women to society’s ostracism?” It wanted “complete equality amongst the sexes”; it wanted “all” to “have an equal chance of life . . .”. That females were “quite equal to men intellectually” had been proven; “. . . given more liberty, a healthier training, there is no reason why they should not be so physically”, it declared on 4 March, 1897. Even though her paper denied it was supporting the “New Women” who were (it seemed) appearing in the 1890s, and “who in dress and manners ape the fast young men”, there is a sense here of that “new spirit” of liberation, going beyond votes and jobs, which Rubinstein has emphasized in reassessing the importance of that decade for women.¹⁰⁰ There is an edgy liveliness in these comments, in contrast to occasional pleasantries – e.g. “many fair fingers . . . fashioning man-traps” for the Volunteers’ bazaar¹⁰¹ – that amply illustrates Caine’s line that, “overall, the 1890s now seem more like a watershed than a dead period”.¹⁰² The *Ulverston Advertiser* was not talking sexual licence: this after all was a newspaper owned by a woman who grew up, courted, married and became a mother in the mid-Victorian generation. It was, we may also note, a newspaper which, in common with but “a few” Conservative papers, had chosen to make no comment on the 1877 birth-control trial involving Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh.¹⁰³ Furthermore, it was one which, on 7 June 1894, emphasised that church-going would make a man “a better and more conscientious workman, a better son, a better husband and father” (although it did not fail to add that church-going had similar benefits for women). Nevertheless, the newspaper’s observations assume greater significance when we note that “in late-Victorian political culture age-old beliefs about women’s physical and mental inferiority were reinforced by the ascendancy of evolutionary biology and also by the ideology of imperialism, to which biologists contributed”.¹⁰⁴

Departures from social reality

“The foundations of the Victorian patriarchy did not crumble because of the feminists’ verbal assaults, but because the patriarchal ideal departed so far from reality”.¹⁰⁵ It is clear that in the light of recent revisionism Holcombe understated the significance of suffragist success in terms of the franchise debate. However, the “gaps” contributed to recognition of the strength of their arguments. In the case of Mrs Jefferson from the moment she took over as owner, the *Ulverston Advertiser* ceased to be in strictly formal terms a patriarchal institution. In Ulverston, in one works, men were a *woman’s* “hands”: “the largest Staff of Men employed by any Printing Firm in the Town”, as it declared in 1892. Willy-nilly, her employees, regardless of any differences they might personally have felt, became at least implicit supporters of her views. If readers of local newspapers were not always sure who owned them, those

who saw the *Ulverston Advertiser* could be in no doubt: her imprint told them.¹⁰⁶ It was to Mrs Jefferson that “all orders, advertisements, and other communications” were “to be addressed”, and “all Cheques and Post Office orders” made out in her name. In this way men of business regularly acknowledged her status as a *businesswoman*. We cannot know how often she appeared in “the office”, or how she behaved towards her men, not even towards Blacklock, but we can be confident no one could forget she was the owner. Moreover, the ownership and male employment claims were made serially; that is to say they were inherent in the “most important quality” a periodical possesses, its “engage(ment) with its readers across time”.¹⁰⁷ As such she had “dramatic prominence”, to use Goffman’s term.¹⁰⁸

Mrs Jefferson’s story illustrates vividly the point that the suffragists had not just nerve but tenacity, too.¹⁰⁹ The survival of her newspaper represented success in Victorian “sexual politics” because of the nature of press rivalry. There was no “Great Newspaper War” of the kind so vividly depicted in *The Card*.¹¹⁰ The point about press competition was its abrasiveness. Yet, from 1865, when she took over the proprietorship, until 1897, when she was 67 years old, and Blacklock, 73, the *Ulverston Advertiser* kept going under her imprint when many Victorian newspapers owned by men did not. It was not worn down.

Mrs Jefferson was taking risks among male (and, indeed, many female) readers in expressing her views in a farming area and market centre. She kept as private as possible in her personal life. This was clearly a decision she made. It had the merit of aiding domestic harmony during her second marriage. It also helped to sustain her respectability as a lady, married or widowed, by putting distance between “business” and home. It did mean, however, that she remained almost entirely invisible in the news columns. This itself could be said to have had strategic relevance from the perspective of the “woman question”, in that it is arguable that the less that was known of the private person, the more her paper’s views could be regarded objectively.

It is well-nigh impossible to gauge the extent to which Mrs Jefferson’s views were supported: what Berridge calls “effects research” is at best an uncertain science.¹¹¹ Whether or not we can speak of a “following”, there was a constituency, and independent-minded female readers with particular agendas appeared in the correspondence columns. For the *Ulverston Advertiser* the 1870s were especially important, being a transitional decade, with 1872 possibly the high-water mark in the Gill for the traditional masculine opinion on the franchise. Reviewing that year on 26 December, the paper noted that it had received “a deluge of letters from Miss A or Miss B requesting a few words in support of an object *for which we have no sympathy whatever*”. (Italics added). Yet liberalisation was in the air: the furiously indignant feminist of 1876 was plainly given prominence. A Margaret Pearson was able to advertise on 13 September 1877, her contradiction of a policeman’s court statement “that I cursed and swore when he visited our house, for I did no such thing nor was there any spirits drunk in the house”. This assertiveness, justified or not, resonated with *Ulverston Advertiser* criticisms of police and courts during this decade. Similar female forcefulness was displayed by “Mater” in 1882 during a clash with “the youngest (medical) practitioner in the town” over the treatment of measles. “Doctors have a deal to learn from experienced nurses and when Mr J. W.

Anderson has cut his wisdom teeth probably he will realise that fact as many professional men have done prior to his time".¹¹²

Advertising was not always easily come by, and, significantly, editorial matter could be used to make up the front page. Nevertheless, as much as 20 years into her ownership Mrs Jefferson was continuing to look ahead and investing in new machinery, and her then confidence in the continuance of her paper proved to be justified. This fact underlines the validity of Westergaard's shrewd comment that, "it is hardly conceivable that long-term exposure to the media themselves has no significant part to play among the sources for those predispositions by which people make sense both of the world and, in turn, of the particular interpretation of the world on offer from the media".¹¹³ However, my intention throughout this study has been to focus principally on Mrs Jefferson herself as proprietor-reader (the lady in those suffrage editorials in the *Ulverston Advertiser*) and thus to answer the question posed at the beginning of the study.

Gender issues (like others, particularly in periods of increased public agitation and sensitivity) come down to details.¹¹⁴ If "in the nineteenth century women were required to surrender even more of their identity and to become, on marriage, not just Mrs *Jane* Smith, but Mrs *John* Smith",¹¹⁵ then how Mrs Jefferson styled herself in her imprint is worth comment. She was neither "Mrs J. S. Bigg" nor "Mrs T. E. Jefferson" but "Mrs Roseanne Hart Bigg", and later "Mrs Roseanne Hart Jefferson". Thus as sole proprietor she was not entirely "confused by law with someone else", to draw on a poem by Philip Larkin.¹¹⁶ In this connection two additional, related, and more important points are to be made. By not making public the editor's name – while at the same time having her own imprint – there was less danger that a newspaper's "personality" would be made inferior to that of a (male) editor.¹¹⁷ Moreover, legally, Mrs Jefferson had no need to publicize her name as proprietor if she had not wanted to.¹¹⁸ We may therefore, noting "an inescapable contradiction between the convention of (editorial) anonymity and the gentlemanly code that abhorred concealment", and without pressing too hard, take her imprint as a symbol of courage and straightforwardness, i.e. "manliness" as understood by Victorian males: "The gentleman spoke his mind and bore the consequences of doing so".¹¹⁹ Put simply: *she was Soulby's Ulverston Advertiser.*

For 22 of her 32 years as proprietor Mrs Jefferson was a widow. Her views were changing *before* she remarried in 1874. When her newspaper welcomed the Married Women's Property Act (1882), which altered family law by providing "that which they never had before, viz: the absolute control over their own property, . . .", it had carefully added (as Victorian feminists well knew) that, "We do not for a moment suppose that Acts of Parliament can humanise and soften the hard hearted and brutal, any more than they can make men sober and honest".¹²⁰ It did not, however – unless this was implicit in its warning – recognise the weakness that ". . . men continued to control the property of women, even if only in the capacity of advisers" because they alone had access to indispensable "skills . . . locked away within the male professions".¹²¹ Her newspaper was, of course, a commercial property. A younger, energetic and ambitious husband might have found it tempting to interfere in the pursuit of a political career. Her re-marriage, seen in this light, was prudential: Thomas Jefferson had no such goals. Indeed, he was unlikely to disturb matters at the *Ulverston Advertiser*.

Mrs Jefferson's story may be seen as a factual complement to the moral purpose of *Middlemarch*. It certainly prompts thoughts of the differentiation and intricate connections between what a sociologist was in the following century to call "the personal troubles of milieu" (for Mrs Jefferson, the uprooting in 1865 of a way of life in which she herself was defined publicly by men) and "the public issues of social structure" (her emergent awareness of herself as a woman with rights in a patriarchal culture, and a newspaper proprietor to boot).¹²² It is this that gives this "hidden" but not "silent" lady importance. Between her personal troubles and the social structure stands J. G. Blacklock.

Did he influence or even hinder the emergence of Mrs Jefferson's views? We know too little about him to answer such questions with confidence. But we can consider the matter judiciously. He was much involved in the beginnings of Ulverston's library, and the town's co-operative and the mutual improvement societies, to say nothing of a long connection with the Oddfellows. More important, it may be suggested, was his "earnest and lifelong" championing of temperance. This movement had the potential to help make men more open-minded on the issue of women's suffrage: Barrow has pointed out that "the temperance-suffrage link was clearly a powerful one; it had a rationale, which many women could accept, of claiming the vote so that women could vote for prohibition".¹²³ It is not without significance, therefore, that Jessie Craigen, who was in town in 1876 and spoke so well on women's suffrage, also lectured there on temperance. The *Ulverston Advertiser*, whose report had praised her, wanted men to spend less time in clubs and more time sharing domestic responsibilities, as we have seen.

Given the "silence" surrounding his relationship with his employer, his earlier varied background, his domestic commitments (a wife and five children) and personal values, and that he worked in "a society that valued and rewarded male aggressiveness" even if "ambivalent about its value",¹²⁴ the selection of words for his obituary¹²⁵ requires close analysis. They were not simply taken off the shelf; they have the smack of truth. Blacklock seems to have been the archetypal conservative right-hand man, capable and loyal in the extreme, but perhaps hidebound and somewhat unimaginative: a "remarkably faithful, straightforward and conscientious servant". He was "hard-working and plodding, careful, painstaking and methodical", a kindly, "perfectly unassuming" person. Under his general management in the later 1860s and early 1870s the *Ulverston Advertiser's* traditional views on women remained constant. On this reading, Mrs Jefferson was the key to change.

The contrast between, on the one hand, Mrs Jefferson's first husband and, on the other, her general manager (and her second husband) is striking. The latter two shared an unobtrusiveness and self-effacement which meant that she had some freedom of manoeuvre in her own micropolitics of gender to preserve respectability (as a woman) and to achieve respect (as a female proprietor). Blacklock, as portrayed by his closely observant obituarist, either agreed with or was content to go along with her views; indifference was not his style. Men's support of women was not always an unalloyed good because of their being unable to resist "taking over".¹²⁶ He was a willing as well as (from the viewpoint of technical expertise) an indispensable collaborator: he was not an "appropriator". The version of masculinity he himself was seen to present in his daily life – his lack of pretension and arrogance combined with his sincerity and determination to serve his late cousin's wife for so

many years, plus the additional fact of his interaction with so many people, underlines this interpretation.

His character, and the layered nature of his and her relationship to one another, resonates intriguingly with a plausible interpretation of what John Ruskin was saying at the time their partnership was about to begin. In “Of Queens’ Gardens”,¹²⁷ Blacklock’s famous contemporary lectured middle-class wives at Manchester Town Hall in 1864 on the role he believed they should exercise. Ruskin argued for the superiority of women. That “a thoughtless and servile obedience” was what women had to provide for men was “the most foolish of all errors”, he stated.¹²⁸ A “truly taught and knightly heart” would accept “direction” from his lady.¹²⁹ “Subservience” was reciprocal, male and female willingly helping each other as best they could according to their place in the social hierarchy. An “egalitarian” feminist would of course say this was pure pretence, but Ruskin had a different angle on society. In the case of Mrs Jefferson, the fact of her paying men their wages made her their economic superior. Blacklock, a kinsman, was likewise dependent on her, too. Making her opinions known publicly she revealed herself to be (in Ruskin’s terms) a “ruler”.¹³⁰ She was no charismatic crusader like Josephine Butler, nor someone like Emily Davies, getting stuck into the practical nitty gritty of committee work. Had she have been, her active presence would have been detectable in the news columns of the local press. However, she was certainly engaging in leadership, moral perhaps even more than cerebral: intelligent, she became unwilling to be “passive”. Being the proprietor of a newspaper rather than, say, being simply the owner of a printing business, gave her the opportunity to go well beyond her domestic setting. This was what Ruskin desired his “Queens” to do. They were not to stop before their hearths or behind their garden walls. But this was something they themselves had to decide.¹³¹ In her special case, Mrs Jefferson’s “rite of institution” impelled her – but only as newspaper proprietor – to “step outside”.

Recognition deserved

Looking back from 1899, the Countess of Aberdeen described the 19th as “a fighting century in the women’s world”.¹³² Viewed against “the full multi-faceted anti-suffragist case”, against all the “political, medical, psychological, sociological, imperialist, military, and philanthropic” arguments,¹³³ the gun-room in the Gill, Ulverston, was small: a greater range of ammunition was available than was used. However, any such criticism has to assume that there should be equivalence between a small provincial newspaper and, say, a daily print or weekly journal of national standing. It would also be to put aside the many other, contextually related, expressions of support for women we have seen in her *Ulverston Advertiser*. Moreover, it would mean forgetting a certain boldness in pushing a view with which not all of its readers were likely to have agreed. To the extent that the latter was the case, the concept of the “Fourth Estate” was being put before the dictates of business. After all, the *Ulverston Advertiser* was an ordinary newspaper, not a rival to the *Women’s Suffrage Journal*.

Roseanne Hart Jefferson deserves recognition for her contribution to the neglected narratives of feminism in regional history. Her story, too, casts an interesting if oblique light on the “backstage” of the Victorian regional press. It also

prompts the question: How did other contemporary female proprietors of regional newspapers get on? What views did they promote? With what kind of men were they associated? There are interesting and fruitful comparative studies to be made, and these are but a few of the questions to be answered.

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