

WHERE NO WOMAN FEARS TO TREAD: THE GOSSIP COLUMN IN THE *ATHENAEUM*, 1885-1901

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Three years after its first appearance, in October 1831, the *Athenaeum* started publishing a rather unique column entitled 'Our Weekly Gossip on Literature and Art'.¹ According to Leslie Marchand, that weekly's most renowned monographer, one column alone contains an almost complete history of Victorian England:

More valuable miscellaneous information concerning what was happening and what was being thought in the world at large as well as in the editorial offices of a literary and art journal, is packed into it than into many pages of reviews and articles. It needs only to be adequately indexed to be used to great advantage by all students of the period. (Marchand 1941, 59)

This last sentence especially makes me smile. "Adequately indexed", indeed, but that is an all but insurmountable task considering the fact that the *Athenaeum* ran for nearly a century and that next to the 'literary gossip' section there was also a column on 'drama gossip', 'fine art gossip', 'science gossip', etc. Each column might, moreover, contain up to thirty different items and those were not strictly limited to Britain. News items were sent in from all parts of the world. Even someone like Stéphane Mallarmé believed this special channel might help publicise his and his friends' works. The entries he contributed during his involvement with the weekly were considered informative enough to be edited by Henry Mondor and Lloyd James Austin in 1962. Their edition constitutes the only extensive publication on the gossip columns of the *Athenaeum*.

The term 'gossip' has a pejorative ring for us, although, quite paradoxically, we still seem to wallow in gossipy articles and news programmes. The recent series of revelations concerning the British Royal family illustrates our indulgence in this socially accepted form of voyeurism. In the Victorian age, however, and certainly for the editors of the *Athenaeum*, the term had a much broader meaning. The subdivision into different types of gossip according to the subject is an indication that it was much more concerned with providing information and much less with spreading vague - and preferably sensational - rumours.² In this paper I want to focus on the contributions by women to that particular section and on the topics they broached within the gossip columns of the *Athenaeum*. I especially want to look at what the gossip column had to offer with respect to women's history in the

decade leading up to the turn of the century. This paper will, therefore, highlight only a minute section of this distinguished Victorian weekly. For the sake of clarity I should mention that my identification of the authors behind all those anonymous entries is solely based on the 'marked file', i.e. the editor's copy of the *Athenaeum*.³

There had been women reviewers working on a regular basis for the *Athenaeum* from the very beginning but their part was - with the exception of Geraldine Jewsbury - a minimal one.⁴ The number of women contributors started to grow quite significantly from the middle of the 80s onwards. That decade marks the beginning of the 'feminisation' of the staff: there were more women contributors and those contributed more articles. To be absolutely objective I must admit that even then they would never produce more than ten percent of the reviews.

It seems quite natural to suppose that regular contributors to the *Athenaeum* also sent in notes for the gossip section as, indeed, they did. But, then again, some names are to be associated with those gossip columns exclusively. For someone like Lucy Lane Clifford (1846-1929), for instance, better known at the time as Mrs W.K. Clifford, the gossip column in the *Athenaeum* was a preferred instrument to let the world know what she had heard, what she was doing or... was not doing.

Lucy Clifford had been more or less goaded into entering the writing profession after the untimely death of her gifted husband, the mathematician, William Kingdon Clifford (1845 - 1879). She had been granted a small pension but that, apparently, did not suffice to provide for herself and her two small children.⁵ Writing meant an additional income and it gave a feeling of independence. Lucy Clifford was to write short stories, novels and plays, but it was her moving tale, *Mrs Keith's Crime* (1885), which was to secure a devoted readership and which set her firmly on the road to popularity and fame.

Her first, still quite sparse, contributions to the *Athenaeum* appeared in the 1880s. In the 90s, however, there was hardly any 'Literary Gossip' column which did not hold her name.⁶ Owing to some obscure reason, she stopped contributing after 1901 though that may have been a direct result of the change of editor that year.

Lucy Clifford's contributions are a multifarious lot. I must, however, first of all point to the very good use she made of this outlet to promote her own writings. One of the first entries she had published is a still quite modest announcement of her *Anyhow Stories* (*Ath* 16.9.1882).⁷ Two years later, however, and less modestly, she promoted the publication of *Under Mother's Wing*, which she called "a book by L.C. author of *Children Busy*, *Children Glad*". She then dexterously managed to insert this short publicity spot:

Of *Children Busy*, *Children Glad* more than thirty thousand copies were sold in little over a twelvemonth, and a German edition has appeared having, like the English issue, T. Pym's illustrations. The book has also been translated into other languages. (*Ath* 28.6.1884)

Her new edition of her late husband's work too is advertised in the *Athenaeum*. Indeed, she was the right person to assume that responsibility for she was able (equipped as she was with the information only a wife possesses) to add certain unknown details to this note. This edition, she writes, will also hold a biographical sketch and a number of letters i.e. if a sufficient number can be found since, to quote her own words, "the professor had so great a dislike to letter-writing". (*Ath* 12.6.1886)⁸

But with her books obviously selling well and her circle of friends expanding through her famous "At Homes" on Sunday afternoons, her personal cares and concerns somewhat shifted to the background and she turned increasingly to other people's activities. She was to reveal the authorship of anonymous contributions to periodicals or novels,⁹ announce the illness or recovery of a distinguished personality, or herald new publications.¹⁰ In several instances there was an obvious link with her personal life, as when she voiced the wish for Prof Huxley, a family friend, to write his autobiography.¹¹ Or again, when she reacted rather indignantly to a pirated edition of Rudyard Kipling's stories prefaced by one of Andrew Lang's essays because, of course, copy right breaches in the US affected her personal career as well (*Ath* 18.10.1890)¹² and more importantly, because Kipling was one of her protégés. Throughout she relished announcing events in which her name is mentioned amongst other "good writers" (*Ath* 13.12.1890, 816).

Mrs Clifford was never to identify explicitly with the suffragettes. But like Mrs Humphry Ward, leader of the anti-suffrage movement, her life-style indicated her views on woman's place in society. As the president of the Women Writers' Society in 1902 she was to proclaim rather patronisingly:

We have been told often enough, and probably we agree, that the happiest women are those who live sheltered lives, loved and protected by strong men - the women who look after their homes and children, are content with simple pleasures, and take no thought of outside work of the sort with which we concern ourselves....But no matter how this may be, it is a wonderful thing to work, to be able to work, to have work.¹³

Her announcements and notes for the gossip section were, as one may expect, certainly not primarily concerned with feminist matters. But, unconsciously perhaps, she slipped them in here and there. She showed an interest first in 1890 when announcing a reprint of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* introduced by Mrs Fawcett (*Ath* 28.6.1890).¹⁴ But she was active in more direct ways too. In December 1892 she wrote on behalf of the Women's Work Committee for the Chicago Exhibition asking for books or MSS by women writers to be sent to the president of the committee. She thereupon lists the names of the committee members not forgetting to mention her own in the second place.¹⁵ And there were certain women authors for whom she evinced a particular regard. In

January 1892 she was clearly actively supporting her colleague, Mrs Riddell, when writing about the possibility of a pension on the Civil List for this prolific novelist (*Ath* 9.1.1892, 53). Other female colleagues for whom she would repeatedly take up the cudgels are Frances Low and Mathilde Blind. She was to recommend the work of both these authors in the gossip columns of the *Athenaeum* as well as in private letters to her own publishers, Macmillans' Company.¹⁶

There seems to be no doubt as to Mrs Clifford's concern for the woman writer in general. She took immense pride in those events which signalled a new, professional era for women. On 6 June 1896, for instance, she authored this quite triumphant note on forthcoming events:

Literary entertainments at which the fair sex play the chief part are growing common. The annual dinner of the Women Writers takes place at the Criterion on the 22nd. The Society of Women Journalists mean to have a 'Birthday Party' on the 24th, at Stafford House (kindly lent by the Duke and Duchess of Sutherland), and the Vagabond Club gives a ladies' dinner at the Holborn Restaurant on the 15th.

Another topic on which she liked to dwell while simultaneously betraying her many connections was the drama. Mrs Clifford herself wrote several quite successful plays. She would, when the occasion presented itself, comment on performances of her own plays, mention new translations or adaptations implying that the play had achieved fame even abroad. One such entry of November 1897 imparts the following information:

A one act play by Mrs. W.K. Clifford, called *A Supreme Moment*, is shortly to be produced at the Comedy Theatre, with Mrs. Bernard Beere in the chief part. It has been translated into French by Mr Walter Herries Pollock with a view to its production on the French Stage. A successful adaptation of one of Mrs Clifford's stories was played for some time in Paris two years ago. She refused to sanction its translation into English as she herself is dramatizing the same story. (*Ath* 27.11.1897, 758)

Her friend and colleague, Henry James, could not boast such an encouraging reception of his plays. Nevertheless she, against all odds, continued to launch his works as well. In the *Athenaeum* of 28 February 1891 we read the following note:

Mr Henry James's play *The American* (founded on his novel of that name) will be played in London during the early summer, probably in May and possibly at the Opera Comique. Meanwhile the play is a great success in the provinces. It was

first produced at Stockport a couple of months ago. (289)

But then James, together with Hubert Crackanthorpe and Kipling emerge from these entries as her most cherished friends. And certainly with James the feeling was reciprocal. She was to be one of a small circle of five friends to be selected by James as deserving enough to inherit from him (Edel 1972, 565).

Mrs Clifford was not the only better known woman contributor to the gossip column. Millicent Garrett Fawcett (1847-1929), the famous suffragette, who wrote several important reviews and reports on political economy for the *Athenaeum* in the 70s and 80s, also freely and readily used the gossip column.¹⁷ Curiously enough perhaps, her entries seem to first and foremost feature her husband's work. In 1880 she was to announce, on two separate occasions, the publication of articles written by her husband, the blind political economist and Professor at Cambridge University, Henry Fawcett. After his death, in 1884, her reviewing for the *Athenaeum* stopped altogether.¹⁸ Yet the reason for her withdrawal probably resulted from her refusal ever again to be associated with her former friend, Sir Charles Dilke, who happened to be the journal's proprietor (Rubinstein 1991, 89) and who was involved in a notorious divorce scandal in 1885.

Mrs Fawcett was certainly not exceptional in seeming to be primarily interested in her husband's work and - perhaps - welfare in these anonymous advertisements. We have seen how Mrs Clifford succeeded in using every single opportunity to keep the memory of her deceased husband alive. But the column also holds a quite unexpected entry by Mrs Humphry Ward on a work her husband was committed to. In a particularly lengthy entry she recommends a forthcoming publication on *The Reign of Queen Victoria* saying that "The editor, who will write several chapters, is Mr. Humphry Ward, who has been fortunate enough to secure the aid of a number of writers of the first authority" (*Ath* 4.12.1886, 745).¹⁹

More intriguing, perhaps, were the entries by Mrs Sitwell since they reveal an intimate knowledge of Sidney Colvin's pre-occupations long before their marriage in 1903 and, again there is this woman's concern that the world should know what he was doing (Calder 1980, 73).²⁰ But more numerous even are Mrs Sitwells' items on another even better known male friend of hers. Robert Louis Stevenson had always considered her as his special confidante, addressing her as 'Madonna' in his letters.²¹ Mrs. Sitwell was a trustworthy source of information on RLS during the latter's voluntary exile in Samoa, announcing new works, or reprints of the old favourites. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that her name vanished from the *Athenaeum* files when the writer had died and the last collections bearing his name had appeared. Her last entry is dated 1896.

More in the feminist sphere we can mention the name of Charlotte Carmichael Stopes (? -1929), mother of the 'notorious' Marie Stopes. Mrs Stopes had acquired a secure position on the *Athenaeum* staff as the specialist reviewer on Shakespeare. In her entries for the gossip column, however, she would, with obvious pleasure, frequently touch upon feminist matters. She reported, for instance, on the portraits of eminent women at the Chicago conference (*Ath*

15.4.1893, 480). A few days later she was to list the number of women who graduated at Edinburgh University.²² Another most interesting item deals with the literary *séance* of the Women's Congress in 1899:

Mrs Steel opened with a general consideration of the way women were related to literature. Mrs Stopes presented a short analysis of the special work women had done in literature in this country. She was followed by representatives from France, Germany, Italy, Finland, Russia, Denmark, and Holland. Lady Lindsay spoke on women and poetry. In the open discussion Mrs J.R. Green and Mrs Rhys Davids were the chief speakers. On Tuesday afternoon there was an interesting discussion on art in its various branches as a profession for women, in which Miss Emily Sartain and Mrs C Brewster and Miss Barbara Hamley. Madame Starr Canzaniani opened the discussion on the special subject "The Spirit of Purity in Art and its Influence on the Well-being of Nations", in which many speakers joined. (*Ath* 1.7. 1899, 39)

Many of the gossip writers were, as observed earlier, also reviewers of the *Athenaeum*. Millicent Garrett Fawcett, Charlotte Stopes, Mary Ward... these were women who would leave their mark on British cultural history because of what they had achieved within their own special subjects. This fact can only enhance the value of the information conveyed in the gossip columns.²³

Another constant though invisible presence in the *Athenaeum's* pages was the active feminist Alice Zimmern (1855-1939). She and her elder sister Helen (1846-1934) were among the regular contributors for many years. They translated long articles written in German or Italian and they had their own special review subjects. Alice would write on schoolbooks or educational studies, Helen reviewed all Italian and German literary works, whether plays or novels, and many philosophical studies in that language. Both were the authors of several remarkable books themselves but both are, I am afraid, totally forgotten nowadays as are so many women of that generation.²⁴

The Zimmern sisters used the gossip column to air their views on their specific interests, to announce what they considered to be new events or to inform the *Athenaeum* readership of topical situations abroad. In October 1896 Alice reported on her disillusion concerning the situation for women students at German universities.²⁵ She was to end her sad survey with the rather subversive remark that "on the other hand, no difficulty is made about permitting those who have passed the examination for the doctorate to use the title, and their position is not nearly so illogical as that of women at Oxford and Cambridge" (*Ath* 24.10.1896).

Alice Zimmern's personal history reveals the origins of her unusual interest in women's education. A Gilchrist travelling scholarship had allowed her to visit the US and to report on schools and colleges there. The information gathered

during her trip was reproduced in her *Methods of Education in the United States* (1894). Naturally she remained in touch with the subject and some interesting news items found their way into the gossip columns.²⁶ When Bryn Mawr College, Pennsylvania, which she called an "enterprising institution", issued a new handbook she obviously thought it might interest her readers since it promised to "contain information concerning the opportunities women have for study at all the European universities, and in each case the facts have been obtained from headquarters". Again, the concluding note to this entry shows her for being what she was, i.e. an incorrigible idealist: "It will probably tend to prove that continental universities offer women far more liberal treatment than is at all suspected in this country" (1.8.1896, 166).

As a former Girton student the information Zimmern provided concerning typically British situations always referred to Cambridge. She used the pages of the *Athenaeum* to raise money for her Alma Mater when she thought the case was well founded. In December 1897, for instance, she launched a public appeal for help in carrying out the expansion plans of the college. "The number of requests for admissions is continually on the increase", she argued, "and unless some action can soon be taken it will be necessary to turn away many promising applicants" (888). The details given in that particular entry prove to what extent she was involved in the growth of the college and the needs of its staff and students.²⁷

A later entry on the Girton alumnae was of an entirely different nature. In 1901, after having attended the second lunch of the so-called old Girton girls, she provided the reader with an insider's view into the sisterhood of Girton alumnae:

The second lunch of old Girton students took place at the Hotel Cecil last Saturday. There were one hundred and fifteen guests present, and the chair was taken by Miss Emily Davies, who still feels a keen interest in the college. She spoke to the first toast, "Success to Girton College", which was most enthusiastically received. The Gathering was a thorough success, and it has been arranged that this London lunch shall take place biennially in those years when the old students' dinner is not held at Girton. (4.5.1901, 568)

The year this particular entry was published marked something of a change in the *Athenaeum's* policy, perhaps, as suggested above, because there was a new editor.²⁸ Women continued to provide material for the gossip columns but feminist flavoured items disappeared. Alice Zimmern ceased to contribute until the war years.

I do not want to overstate the importance of the nineties' gossip columns, either for the women who contributed to them or for that class of readers who read them, unawares. Unfortunately, I have as yet found no readers' reactions to those items which indirectly contributed to the women's movement. The fact remains, however, that the *Athenaeum* was and is considered "the most influential Victorian

review" with a circulation approaching 20,000 at its peak (Sutherland 1988, 32).

What then is there to conclude when reading this selection of entries? There is, first of all, the common factor that most of those entries display a strong autobiographical and biographical dimension. Prospective biographers of a nineteenth-century subject would do well to check these columns if they are desperately short of material for certain periods or if they want to see a hypothesis confirmed. But this does not in any way distinguish the notes by women writers from what their male colleagues sent in. Indeed, it must be admitted that there were also several entries about women writers written by male staff members. Women simply used the channels opened by men just for those purposes. The gossip column was, in other words, a clever way of promoting one's own and one's friends' books or activities. It benefited one's 'Public Relations' and one was paid for it into the bargain.

The many items on specifically feminist issues, on the other hand, were by and large written by the women contributors. So far, only little research has been done about the role journals and journalists have played in the dissemination of feminist ideas. But these notes must certainly have encouraged some of the *Athenaeum's* female readers to join a network or participate in one of the initiatives announced in its columns. Each of those items was another sure sign that society was in transition, moving on to modern times with the 'New Woman' well in place.

The majority of those female gossip writers certainly seem to fit into the general picture of modernist women. They were often single (whether they were unmarried, widows or separated does not matter) and consciously or unconsciously feminist. Besides, those women were writing, to use Hanscombe and Smyers' phrase, "for their lives", to earn a living. They clearly succeeded in combining that necessary evil with more personal goals and ambitions.

ENDNOTES

¹ The very first article appeared on 15 October 1831 (Marchand 1941, 59) but there had been something like 'Miscellanea' before that.

² For a list of all the definitions of gossip see Marc. It was not unusual to use the term 'gossip' in the sense of 'news' in the nineteenth-century. Robert Louis Stevenson certainly did (Colvin 1911, Vol. 1, 179) and so did Mallarmé (Mondor and Austin 1962, 12). According to a note in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, "originally a 'gossip' was a person who had spiritual affinity with another and acted as a sponsor in baptism (from God-sibbe : relative in God)". With thanks to Jane Moore.

³ Each consecutive editor marked the names of every contributor to the *Athenaeum* in this special editor's copy. The 'Marked File' is now kept at the City University Library; for more detailed information see Wellens and Demoor.

⁴ For a detailed analysis of Jewsbury's contributions see Frykstedt.

⁵ In a letter to Sir Frederick Pollock, a close friend of the Cliffords, Lucy Clifford said she had an annual income of £216 after her husband's death (unpublished letter in the private collection of Mrs Alice Dilke).

⁶ I counted, for instance, 35 short notes for 1890.

⁷ The earliest entry marked 'Mrs Clifford' is to be found in 1881.

⁸ Another note related to her husband appeared on 26 June 1886, and took Karl Pearson's publication of a volume in the *International Series* as a peg.

⁹ See e.g. *Athenaeum* issues in the marked file of 1.2.90, 150; 22.3.90, 373; 4.10.90, 452.

¹⁰ See e.g., 14.6.1893, 772; 21.6.90, 801, 805; 4.10.1890, 452; 11.10.1890, 485 and 25.10.1890, 550 in the marked file of the *Athenaeum*.

¹¹ "It has been pointed out that though he has at various times told us a good deal of what he does not believe, yet he has been extremely chary of declaring himself in an opposite direction" (4.10.1890, 452).

¹² See also *Athenaeum* 25.10.1890, 549.

¹³ "The Women-Writers Dinner", *Churchwoman* 13.6.1902, 387. With thanks to Monty Chisholm for providing this article.

¹⁴ According to David Rubinstein Mrs Fawcett succeeded in making this particular edition attractive even to the less ardent feminists amongst the female readers. Lucy Clifford would fit that particular variety.

¹⁵ She mentions: "Miss Agnes Clerke; Mrs W.K. Clifford; Mrs J.R. Green; Mrs Humphry Ward; Mrs J.E.H. Gordon (President); Miss Kingsley" (*Ath* 31.12. 1892, 922).

¹⁶ See the unpublished letter in the Macmillan file at the British Library Add.MS. 54 932.

¹⁷ I hope to publish a full-length paper on the contributions by Millicent Garrett Fawcett to the *Athenaeum* as part of a projected book on the weekly.

¹⁸ I have found one later entry in the gossip column marked as being hers (*Ath* 28.11.1886).

¹⁹ Mary Ward authored a number of reviews for the *Athenaeum* in the eighties and has her name under one letter, published in May 1892 (633).

²⁰ For example: 20 April 1895.

²¹ Sidney Colvin was so discreet as to leave out those, at the time, rather compromising first words in his edition of the Stevenson correspondence. Mrs Sitwell wrote on RLS in the *Athenaeum* of 20.12.90, 856; 14.5.92, 634.

²² "The women have done well this year: 122 have matriculated, and 57 of these undergraduates have shared in class distinctions" (22.4.1893).

²³ Another such woman was Jessie Weston (1850-1928), no doubt a familiar name to most students of the last century. Jessie Weston was not a regular contributor to the *Athenaeum* but she did write a few reviews in 1899 and she sent a letter to be published in the gossip column.

²⁴ Helen Zimmern's list of publications is impressive. Suffice it to mention her translations of Nietzsche, Lessing, Goldoni and biographies of Schopenhauer, Lessing and Maria Edgeworth. Alice Zimmern published translations from the classics and several books on education.

²⁵ "The movement in favour of admitting women to the German universities is progressing slowly, but surely. Five ladies have up till now taken the doctor's degree at Heidelberg. One of these, an American, passed so brilliantly that she was at once offered an appointment at the German zoological station near Naples. The university, however, still admits ladies to lectures only as a favour, and not as a right, and even those who have passed the *Abiturienten* examination are still classed as *Hospitantinnen*" (*Ath* 24.10.1896).

²⁶ The gossip column seems to have suited Alice in particular. Her own entry in the *Who's Who* mentions 'listening-in' as one of her favourite pastimes.

²⁷ "It is proposed to annex the present hall to the library; to build a new hall and kitchen department, a chapel, and lecture rooms; to make further provision for the resident staff; and to add rooms for about fifty students, making up the whole to a hundred and fifty. The hall will be planned on such a scale as to suffice for two hundred and fifty, the number fixed as the ultimate limit, and it would be easy to add students' rooms from time to time as they were wanted".

²⁸ Vernon Rendall (1869-1960) was to be its editor from 1901 up to 1916.

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