

A Woman's Right to Work: Emily Faithfull and the Victoria Press

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Abstract

Emily Faithfull was a prominent figure in both the history of publishing and the struggle for women's rights during the Victorian era. This article discusses the importance of her role in implementing an all-female-run printing press, and how the publications created at the Victoria Press were key figures in influencing their readers to support the cause. It aims to answer the question of Emily's impact on future generations of females working in print culture and how her career was essential for women gaining access to similar careers. Through opposition and harsh scrutiny, Emily Faithfull and her peers set out to generate positive change for their gender and create an atmosphere of encouragement for women to obtain remunerative careers to gain economic independence.

Key Words

Emily Faithfull, Victoria Press, Victoria Magazine, English Woman's Journal, Women's Rights

Introduction

Throughout history, the status of women has been a subject of great debate. The 19th century is often seen as one of the most important eras for the progression of equal rights for women. In the beginning of the century, old ideologies were still largely believed in. Women were defined, physically and intellectually, 'as the "weaker" sex, in all ways subordinate to male authority' (Marsh 2016). Society saw women as needing to be fully dependent on men to take care of their basic needs and therefore put in place laws that kept them in this dependent position. And, 'under 19th century British common law, women were barely considered people at all.' (Sailus 2017)

A doctrine known as 'separate spheres' emerged that maintained the idea that a man's place was in the public sphere while a woman's place was in the private, domestic sphere. A man was expected to provide for the family and maintain a social appearance by spending his free time at pubs and men's clubs, while a woman maintained the home, took care of the children and protected her innocence by staying out of public life. Women were excluded from all public aspects of society including politics, higher education, employment, and owning property.

Women's acceptance of these traditional roles soon began to dissipate. They challenged their exclusion from higher education, politics, and professional careers by diligently speaking out against their suppression and taking action to create positive change. Employment for middle-class women was one of the greatest topical debates, because it gave women a chance to take care of themselves and provided them with a sense of self-worth outside of marriage and child-rearing. Those in opposition thought it was disruptive to the home, as it kept women from focusing solely on domestic duties.

Although some women did have jobs, these were primarily paid poorly and were in harsh conditions. Relying on a man was preferable to living in poverty. According to the Victoria and Albert Museum London, 'it is calculated that while most men worked, only one-third of women were in employment at any time in the nineteenth century.' (Marsh 2016)

Progressive women realized it was time for a change and soon began to meet to start developing tactics to make those changes a reality.

One such progressive woman was Emily Faithfull (1835–95), a publisher and woman's rights activist. Her passion was both for the written word and for other women to have access to careers in print culture. Her experience as a practical female worker made her 'feel more strongly every day of her life,' (Faithfull 1871, 17) so she campaigned for her Victorian sisters to have that same opportunity. Through her initiative, generations of women have been able to obtain publishing careers of their own.

A Woman's Right to Work

Emily Faithfull began her career as a writer for the *English Woman's Journal* (1858–64) at the age of 23. Under the tutelage of Bessie Parkes, Faithfull was introduced into a world of equally strong-minded women, who were using their passion for print culture to keep women informed on various issues related to their gender. These women dedicated their lives to the movement by creating societies, petitioning, lecturing, and avidly writing to prove that they would no longer sit idly and allow their suppression to take place. One such organisation was the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women (SPEW).

On 7 July 1859, SPEW held its first formal meeting in London with Faithfull sitting as committee secretary - a position she kept until November that same year. Their main goals were to help women gain economic independence through employment and to improve working conditions for those already employed. During this first meeting, it was noted that 'only three remunerative employments were open to middle-class women, namely, teaching, domestic service and needlework' and decided 'to promote a range of suitable occupations' (Stone 1994, 42). These occupations included printing, law copying, domestic art, hairdressing, and watch making. It was essential that women received proper training in order to obtain employment in these proposed careers, so the members of SPEW set out to find professionals willing to instruct them.

Bessie Parkes and Emily Faithfull both agreed to learn the craft of printing and were 'convinced that women [...] could be trained as compositors. So Faithfull and George W. Hastings undertook jointly to finance a press for the employment of women and to begin operations as soon as possible, with Faithfull in full control' (Stone 1994, 51). Emily Faithfull held a powerful belief that women needed to get out of the private sphere.

The print industry provided a way for women to have access to the public sphere regardless of them having to go out to find work. Through publications, women were able to experience the injustice that their gender was facing in society. Their reading of essential political magazines and periodicals was a powerful influence for those women who needed to be swayed towards the cause. Print culture was used as a device to spread the word and attract the masses in favour of women's rights. Women's involvement in the actual creation of these materials not only helped their political agenda, but also provided a powerful example of how women were just as essential to the public sphere as they were to the private one. Faithfull's hope was that 'large numbers of women would soon be employed in printing establishments' (Stone 1994, 54) after society saw how successful her female compositors were at the Victoria Press.

The Victoria Press

Emily Faithfull knew that her printing establishment would set an example for future generations of employment for women. She had to get it right or the endeavour would all be for nothing. Therefore, she made it her mission to find a building in a safe location that offered excellent working conditions. On 25 March 1860, the Victoria Press opened at Great Coram Street in London with 'five apprentices from SPEW at premiums of £10 each and others apprenticed by friends and relatives, the total rising to sixteen by September 1860'. (Stone 1994, 52) Faithfull's main focus was to train female compositors or typesetters, but later argued 'that women were naturally suited for proofreading and copy-editing components of the printing process as well' (Frawley 1998, 91). All aspects of the printing process were considered accessible for women under Faithfull's guidance; however, she did

employ men to take care of the heavy lifting – an aspect of her business that was met with much scrutiny by the public. Regardless, the Victoria Press became one of the first successful businesses established for the employment of women.

From the day its doors opened, the Victoria Press had a busy schedule. It became the official printer of the *English Woman's Journal and Transactions*, and acquired various other print ventures, such as printing the papers for SPEW and the Social Science Association (SSA). Regardless of opposition, Faithfull was successful in her objectives and proudly maintained a business that offered safe and sanitary working conditions for her girls:

When I proposed, in 1859, to open a printing-office for women, I was told that setting up type would degrade and injure them, and that I could scarcely suggest a more suitable employment; yet, even while these warnings were being given, girls were extensively employed, in an inferior capacity, in printing establishments as machine feeders; a branch of the business which appeared to me so unsuitable, that I never allowed it to be undertaken by girls in the office I eventually started for female compositors. (Faithfull 1871, 6)

Through excellent working conditions, equal pay among her male and female employees, and the maintenance of a successful printing establishment, Faithfull set the standard for a thriving female-run institution.

After a successful first year, the press continued to increase their employment of both men and women and began transitioning from simply being a printer to a publisher: 'In addition to the *Victoria Regia*, five titles issued in that year bore the imprint, "Printed and Published by Emily Faithfull & Co., Victoria Press, (for the Employment of Women), Great Coram Street, W.C."' (Stone 1994, 57) The *Victoria Regia* was a beautifully bound collection of prose and verse that was the front-runner in proving the Victoria Press was a strong contender in the publishing and printing market. Thus, Faithfull was appointed 'Printer and Publisher in Ordinary to Her Majesty' and was awarded 'a medal for good printing from the Jurors of the International Exhibition' (Stone 1994, 57).

In 1862, the Victoria Press expanded with an additional steam-printing office and the production of 'the *Victoria Magazine* (1863-1880), a monthly journal to be printed at the Press along with all the other publications' (Stone 1994, 58). These new additions increased the number of employees and ensured the continuation of work regardless of outside factors. This proved considerably helpful when the contract with the *English Woman's Journal* ended the following year, when Emily Faithfull was involved in the scandalous Codrington divorce case that led to her dismissal from many aspects of her previous life including SPEW and the *English Woman's Review*. Some say that her 'financial difficulties with the Victoria Press and the *Victoria Magazine* in 1863 and 1864' (Stone 1994, 23) were due to this scandal. Regardless of where the financial difficulties originated, there were still a variety of factors, including added expenses from producing the *Victoria Magazine*, which led to financial distress forcing Faithfull to sell a share of the Victoria Press to William Wilfred Head.

W.W. Head took full ownership of the printing portion of the business in 1867 until 1871. During that time, the Press printed very few publications: the *Victoria Press Almanack*, *The Victoria Press: Its History an Vindication*, Faithfull's first book *Change Upon Change*, the *Victoria Magazine*, and a few other society papers. Business was not as successful as Head had hoped. So, in 1871, Faithfull once again resumed ownership, except for the steam-printing segment of the press. The majority of her effort at the Victoria Press was put back into the *Victoria Magazine* until 1874 when she 'began publishing her penny weekly, *Women and Work* (1874-76), and she extended it again with her weekly newspaper *West London Express* (1877-78)' (Stone 1994, 59). Despite these new publications, business slowly began to dwindle until the Press was solely focused on publishing the *Victoria Magazine*. In April 1881, Faithfull sold the Victoria Press to the Queen Printing and Publishing Company ending 'three decades of involvement as a publisher in the cause of women's rights' (Stone 1994, 59).

The English Woman's Journal and the Victoria Magazine

The Victoria Press not only worked as an establishment that employed women, but it also produced publications that further promoted this idea by offering advice and opportunities for other women who wanted to get involved in the working world and the women's movement. Women's political magazines of the 19th century offered excellent content to ignite emotions in their readers, swaying them toward the women's rights cause. These publications were essential pieces of the women's rights movement – they worked as a catalyst for spreading ideas and reaching the private sphere in ways no other aspect of the movement could.

As previously mentioned, the *English Woman's Journal* was one of the first publications to be printed at the Victoria Press. It was a product of the Langham Place Circle – a society that met to discuss women's issues and propose plans to improve women's standing in the public sphere. This organisation included members of the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women, such as Bessie Parkes and Emily Faithfull. They saw the publication as the print version of their discussions and used it to promote the good things that their society and other women were doing for the women's movement. The *English Woman's Journal's* main goal was to promote the employment of women but it also 'published material by women, represented women as exemplars in history and in the present, and demonstrated the potential for women to play a full part in nineteenth-century society' (Mussell 2017).

Where the *English Woman's Journal* was the print version of the Langham Place Circle's discussions and ideas, the *Victoria Magazine* was the essence of Emily Faithfull's beliefs surrounding women and her passion for the arts and her Queen. The contents of the magazine often featured the activities of the Queen, literary reviews, discussion of women's employment and various other topics relevant for women. Nevertheless, it was also seen as a continuation of the work that the *English Woman's Journal* was attempting for the women's movement. These publications were crucial for the promotion of women's employment and proved to be an essential guide for the single, middle-class woman:

Their importance in the history of women's publishing remains, for the magazines did provide a galvanizing focus for the disparate forces of the women's movement, 'thread[ing] separate parts of the movement, [bringing] the thinkers and the workers together', and a continuous voice in print which lasted through two decades. In addition, the energy and initiative of the women who gathered to produce these journals extended beyond the publications themselves, and bore fruit in a range of projects dealing with women's employment, education, and welfare. (Nestor 1982, 104)

Without these two publications, English women would not have been aware of the different opportunities that were available to them. Through print, the movement was able to proceed forward by keeping women informed on how they could get involved and gave them chance to achieve remunerative employment for their economic independence.

Strength Through Scrutiny and Opposition

Emily Faithfull and other members of SPEW knew that their idea to promote remunerative employment for women would be strongly opposed. Although Faithfull and her employees were able to prove that they were capable of running a successful printing and publishing establishment, 'none was more hotly contested than the formation of the Victoria Press' (Fredeman 1974, 140). Traditionally, the printing press was a male-dominated profession that generally only involved women if they were members of the family or if they were doing 'feminine' jobs.

The Victoria Press was the first all-female operated printing company and because of this, Faithfull knew that every action she took concerning the Victoria Press would be put under harsh scrutiny, regardless of the opinion about the Press itself. Men that opposed the press would often 'hide behind masks of protectiveness (of "delicate women")' (Stone 1994, 50) and women would argue that it degraded the femininity of their sex. However, people such as Munby, who were for the employment of women, would go 'to the other extreme in

expressing contempt for Faithfull's decision to hire men for tasks' (Stone 1994, 50) that women could handle themselves.

Male printers were the strongest opposition to the Victoria Press. They opposed the idea of women working as compositors so vehemently that they did more than speak about their displeasure. According to Faithfull, they resorted to sabotage. She claimed:

The opposition was not only directed at the capitalist, but the girl apprentices were subjected to all kinds of annoyance. Tricks of a most unwomanly nature were resorted to, their frames and stools were covered with ink, to destroy their dresses unawares, the letters were mixed up in their boxes, and the cases were emptied of 'sorts'. (Faithfull 1884, 26)

Luckily, Faithfull and her employees were strong-minded women and successfully fought through the opposition to create a quality printing operation. These women held so strongly unto their beliefs that they created a thriving working environment that played a huge role in the women's movement.

Emily Faithfull's Impact

As we look back on the impact of Emily Faithfull and her Victoria Press, we can't help but feel grateful for the work that she put into it. Through innovation and a willingness to dedicate her life to the cause, Faithfull was able to successfully pave the way for future generations of women working in print culture. Although there was strong opposition at the time, there were also a great number of people that saw the positive influence of Faithfull and the Victoria Press.

One of Faithfull's greatest decisions to help gain support was to encourage people to come visit the Press. Through their visits, many people were inspired to praise the endeavour. Even American printers, such as Henry Houghton, owner of Riverside Press, came to visit the female compositors and brought back new ideas for their own establishments:

On concluding the tour of inspection, Mr. Houghton reminded me of a visit he had paid to my London printing establishment, adding that the idea of introducing women compositors into his office had been due to what he had seen and heard at the Victoria Press. (Faithfull 1884, 24)

Through Faithfull's influence, women in the UK and America were finally gaining acceptance into more aspects of print culture than ever before.

Emily Faithfull was proud of everything that she accomplished with the Victoria Press and her various other projects. She explained, 'after an existence of twenty years, [the Victoria Press] accomplished the work for which it was specially designed, for compositors were drafted from it into other printing-offices, and the business has been practically opened to women' (Faithfull 1884, 27). Faithfull and her Victoria Press were essential in helping women gain employment in her generation but also in the centuries to come. She saw her generation's work as a time of transition. They knew that everything that they were fighting for was for the rights of future women professionals. G.W. Hastings said it best in his address at a SPEW meeting:

It was owing to [Faithfull's] energy, perseverance and discretion that the [establishment of the Press] had proved so successful, and... it was to her efforts we now owed the fact that the first woman's printing office was so well organized and regulated, and had been conducted with such skill for the business, and such kind thought for the workers, that most, if not all, the objections urged against such a scheme had been proved futile at once and forever. (Stone 1994, 54)

The sale of the Victoria Press did not end Emily Faithfull's career in print culture or political activism. She simply moved on to become an author and lecturer. Faithfull travelled across the UK and America, giving talks about the essential changes that needed to take place for women. Her continued passion for women's employment and better working conditions, led her to speak at several prestigious events and write two books: *Change Upon Change* (1868) and *Three Visits to America* (1884). Faithfull continued her work until her death in 1895. The legacy of Emily Faithfull and the Victoria Press lives on as a powerful example of the influential role print culture plays in the women's movement of the 19th century.

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