

The June Lloyd lecture, February 13th 2015
Lucinda Hawksley “March, Women, March” – Edwina Cole

The latest in the series of June Lloyd Lectures was delivered by Lucinda Hawksley as part of the programme looking at issues surrounding the First World War.

In his opening remarks, Dick (Selwood) explained who June Lloyd was and pointed out that this, the 5th lecture was the first to be given by a woman. I suspect that would have come to no surprise to our presenter!

She began by talking about the general suffrage movement, which embraced far more than just the Suffragettes. Both men and women of the time were seeking equality, and were, indeed, forward thinkers who knew that the changes they were fighting for probably wouldn't come in time for them to benefit – but would make a considerable impact on others in the future.

Unfortunately, the ideas that drove the movement seem to have been largely forgotten by some at the present time, with very few young women registering to vote, or even having a desire to do so. The book, on which this lecture was based, is timely, for it reminds us all of how fortunate we are, and how many sacrifices were made to ensure our current freedoms.

We then heard the detail – some of it truly shocking – of how strong and determined women fought for changes to be made.

Beginning with the publication in 1792 of “A Vindication of the Rights of Women” by Mary Woolstonecraft, we learned that the struggle for equality was not just about the vote. There were so many other issues, and indeed equal pay remains a bone of contention even today. So many names, so many sacrifices, and so much has passed into history that we are in danger of forgetting the work that was put in over so many years.

Caroline Norton worked for 20 years to make a difference. She was no doubt spurred on by the appalling treatment she received at the hands of her husband. Eventually her campaigning led to the Custody of Infants Act of 1839, the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1859 and the Married Women's Property Act in 1870. Dr Richard Pankhurst drew this up, and it ensured that women could keep some of their earnings for themselves. It was hard to hear about the circumstances that led to so many married women becoming virtual slaves in marriage and the property of their husbands, so this act marked a huge change.

A vicar's wife, Josephine Butler, brought the issue of contagious diseases into the open and eventually saw the law changed when the Contagious Diseases Acts were finally repealed in 1886. Thus, the welfare of prostitutes was protected without them being exploited.

The list continued with Elizabeth Garrett-Anderson who was forced to teach herself, but succeeded in becoming the first female doctor who eventually opened the first hospital for women.

George Eliot wrote under a male pseudonym because she felt her work wouldn't be accepted if she wrote under her real name which was Mary Ann Evans. As it was. On her death in 1880 she was denied a place in Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey because she had a relationship with a married man and later married a man much younger than herself.

We heard that Queen Victoria held the women's movement back because she didn't believe that men and women should be equal. She did, however, produce very strong-minded daughters!

In 1888 the Match Girls Strike highlighted the appalling working conditions at the Bryant & May factory. 3 women were sacked without references, but the journalist Annie Kenney led a protest against their treatment and backed it up with well written articles. This resulted in the capitulation of the company and improvement in working conditions.

Of course, not all women wanted the vote. The anti-suffrage campaign was pursued with great vigour in some quarters, and this may be the reason why Britain was slow to deal with the issue.

There is little doubt, however, that women were shown a great disrespect in some quarters, and it may have surprised some of the audience to hear that Winston Churchill (then Home Secretary) was party to the events on Black Friday – 18th November 1910. The Police were told that they could use sexual violence against women who took part in protests. In the event, this caused considerable embarrassment to the government as the press published pictures of the police assaulting unarmed female protesters.

In June 1913 Emily Wilding-Davison, a militant activist who fought for woman's suffrage, threw herself in front of the king's horse at the Derby of that year. At first it was thought that this was a deliberate suicide attempt, but more recent thinking is that she was trying to attach a scarf with the colours of the movement to the horse's bridle. She sustained serious injuries and died 4 days later, becoming a martyr for the cause.

The fight for suffrage was going on all over the world, and other countries resolved the issues before they were dealt with in Britain. In Holloway Prison both men and women fighting the cause were treated badly with both sexes being force-fed. If anything, the men were treated more badly than the women. People thought that women would get the vote in 1913, but then the First World War came and turned the world upside down.

Eventually some women got the vote in 1918 if they owned property and were over 30, but most had to wait until 1928 when all women over the age of 21 were enfranchised.

The talk prompted several questions, covering a wide range of topics and I'm sure many will be interested to read the book in its entirety after such an inspiring presentation.