

The Josephine Butler Memorial Lecture 1995

delivered by
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at
Josephine Butler House, Liverpool John Moores University
on 16 March 1995

CHARITY REDISCOVERED

THE RELEVANCE OF JOSEPHINE BUTLER

My first thought when I was asked to give this lecture was to call it **No Museum Piece**. How I weary of hearing people talk of Josephine Butler as a figure from the remote past, her great campaign against the state regulation of prostitution as simply an episode in an on-going saga, her particular target - the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act - something long since achieved. She is put in a stained glass window at the Cathedral. She has a place in the Church calendar. Books are written about her as a forgotten saint. All very noble and uplifting but nothing to do with us.

I believe that this attitude to Josephine is typical of the blind refusal to look back before we try to move forward, that is a major cause of our current loss of direction. We never seem to learn. The capacity of the human race to go on re-inventing the wheel never ceases to amaze me. In fact, Josephine is no saint who from her labours rests. What she did and why she did it is of a fundamental importance which makes it of direct relevance to the social and political turbulence in which we find ourselves today, and even more to the unforeseeable future which we nervously contemplate. So my purpose is not to glorify the saint but to seek to discover, in a spirit of the greatest humility, what she has to say to us in the late twentieth century.

I wish I could take it for granted that you are all familiar with the reasons for Josephine's claim to fame, but alas, she is indeed a forgotten saint. There are various biographies about her but I recommend you try to lay hands on her own account. She had a pen like a laser beam and she never hesitated to use it to cut right through the heart of any matter however distasteful. Her records make a marvellous read.

First, to spell out the literal connection between her life and ours. She was born in 1828. Liverpool was the base from which she conducted the long campaign against the evil of regulated prostitution from 1866. She died in 1906, a matter of months after I was born. When I was a student, one of the first ever to take a degree in social science, I used to go to lectures on moral welfare in the Josephine Butler house in Abercromby Square of which all I recollect is the extreme parsimony of the macaroni cheese we had for supper. Later, when I was a Councillor for the Granby Ward in the 1960s, I was caught up in the superb outburst of moral outrage on the

part of local residents, led by all three churches, against the influx of kerb crawlers following the Wolfenden Act. How Josephine would have approved. And now here we are, in the new Josephine Butler House, guests of the John Moores University, the latest in the long chain of connections that link us with Josephine.

For the first half of her life, Josephine's story was typical of her circumstances and her times. She was born in Northumberland where her father was estate agent for a large charitable foundation. He was a true north countryman, upright and independent with firm convictions on such issues as the abolition of slavery. Her mother was said to be of Huguenot stock, with all that that implies. Evidently Josephine had an enviably free and happy childhood in the course of which she acquired a well-educated mind and developed a personality of exceptional sparkle and grace.

Like so many women of her class and generation, she went through a dark period in her late teens when she found herself questioning the very existence of a just God. We can only speculate as to what it was that so disturbed her peace of mind but in the context of her upbringing she cannot have been unaware of the contrast between the lives of the poor and her own comfortable existence. The constant laments of an aunt about the waste of energy and talent imposed on women by the conventions of the nouveau middle class must have sharpened her awareness of her own inability to make any useful contribution to the improvement of the condition of the poor families she visited. She duly emerged from this episode with her faith in God restored but significantly, her attendance at Church was for evermore restricted to a single attendance on Sundays. Indeed, her relationship with God was entirely one of her own devising; her quite literal reliance on Him for daily guidance may strike us today as an excess of piety but there can be no question that it sprang out of the intensity of her identification with the Infinite.

The process of recovery was no doubt facilitated by the arrival of George Butler on his appointment as a tutor attached to Durham Cathedral. They were married in 1852, and commenced their life together in Oxford. There Josephine enjoyed the academic atmosphere but the complacency of masculine college life and the lamentable climate provoked her to chronic dissatisfaction. One episode survives to suggest the existence of a slow fire of feeling which perhaps dates from the earlier dark period of her adolescence. Hearing of the misdemeanour of a graduate, she immediately advanced upon the great Jowett, Master of Balliol, to demand retribution for the wronged young woman. His refusal must have hit hard but for the moment, she busied herself with practical assistance for the girl concerned. A spell in Cheltenham where George was Deputy Head of the College proved equally uncongenial, especially when she and her husband openly declared their support for the north in the American struggle for the abolition of slavery.

Then in 1866 came the move to Liverpool when George was appointed Headmaster of Liverpool College. This was a huge day school, established largely by the non-conformist merchant community to meet the needs of the city's cosmopolitan population. Butler's progressive ideas on education - he pioneered the teaching of geography as an academic subject and gave active support to the movement for the education of women and the working classes - quickly won him standing in the local community. It was to him that Anne Jemima Clough (later to become the first head of Newnham College for women) went for support when she launched her campaign for higher education for women in Liverpool. Understandably, it was the headmaster's

brilliant young wife who was invited to lead the local committee. Josephine and her husband were active in the promotion of a pioneering scheme for the provision of adult education lectures which contributed to the eventual founding of the University in Liverpool. In due course, she was elected president of the national movement for education for women, in which capacity she acquired a considerable reputation.

All this was yet to come. Meanwhile, for Josephine the move to Liverpool brought little peace of mind. Now aged thirty-eight, she found herself facing the classic dilemma of many a married woman, the fact that she could no longer justify her existence or even fill in her time by devoting all her energies to concern for her little family.

Her husband was successfully launched on his career. Her three boys were absorbed in a world of school from which she was necessarily excluded. Her little daughter died tragically some time before. Bored and frustrated, she pined in solitude in a Sefton Park suburb where the complacency of the ladies of the newly-arrived commercial classes brought her no comfort. Desperately she sought for relief from the problem of her own futility. The Workhouse on Brownlow Hill, vastly extended in response to the crisis of the cotton famine, was an obvious starting point but how she found herself in the women's wards instead of visiting the customary sick or old is not clear.

I won't spoil her own vivid account of what then ensued by quoting snippets from it. The incredible response which quickly replaced the initial hostility and derision with which the women greeted her suggests that she tapped some deep well of feeling common to them all simply by virtue of their shared womanhood. Her emotions once engaged, without more ado some of the women were taken into her own home as honoured guests. That proving totally inadequate to the avalanche of need that descended on her, she and her husband embarked on an ever-expanding programme for the provision of accommodation and even employment for women. Inevitably, it was to Josephine that a little group of doctors concerned with the regulation of prostitution turned to lead their campaign against the extension of the system of the state regulation of vice by means of the Contagious Diseases Act. This Act gave the police powers of random arrest and enforced medical examination which in practice resulted in injustice and physical abuse

This was indeed a moment of choice for Josephine. Until then, though she had fretted against the restrictions of middle class life, she had never stepped out of line; support for the demand for better education for women roused opposition but entailed no indecorum on her part. It is hard for us today to appreciate the magnitude of what was asked of her, so different now is the climate of opinion on sexual issues. The women she had come to know had revealed to her a depth of degradation far beyond anything she could ever have imagined and she recoiled from the idea of breaking the barrier of silence behind which the subject was secreted. The probable damage to her husband's career would alone have been sufficient excuse for refusal.

Yet one cannot help but suspect that - though she never said as much - she must have been tantalised by the opportunity offered to her. Here at last she would have something to do. Here at last she would find an outlet for all the accumulated frustration of years of struggling against the restrictions of her role as a wife and

mother, against the futility of being a woman. Here at last she might find relief from the pain of the compassion she felt for women so unjustly treated. The argument that only a woman could endow the women's protest with credibility must surely have been decisive. To refuse would surely have been unthinkable. 'I feel as if I must go out into the streets and cry aloud or my heart will break.'

I don't propose to take the story of what happened next any further. Those who are interested cannot do better than read Josephine's own record. It is a superb story of courage and the most dogged determination, superbly told and one which has everything to teach us about the power of moral commitment as the essential basis of political action. If you are ever tempted to support schemes for the state regulation of vice, read what she has to say on the subject. I defy you to proceed after that.

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The pity of it is that we stop there, with the stained glass saint. Certainly she was a saint to tolerate vituperation and muck-raking such as is only paralleled by the gutter press with which we are now sadly familiar. But it took twenty years or more for the repeal of the Act to be achieved; what kept her going through that long and painful stint? Was the repeal of a piece of legislation all there was to it or did her dedication to that specific target conceal some much more fundamental purpose? And where did her zeal for the education of women come in?

The answer is implicit in all she said and did and wrote - in her very way of life. The campaign for the higher education of women was no more than a means to an end. Prostitution was only the tip of the iceberg of discrimination against women in general. Underlying her commitment to both of these 'causes' was the passion of her anger against the whole scandalous injustice of the denial to women of the opportunity to live their lives to the full. Women must be set free to play their part as responsible members of the society to which they belonged. They must take their place in the community on equal terms with men. To her, the implications of that claim were so obvious as hardly to need to be stated. The whole relationship between men and women would have to be put on a totally new footing.

In the context of the times, this was little short of visionary. Just what form this relationship should take in practice was something Josephine never put into words; to her, equality was a principle not a project. To apply it explicitly to the relationship between individual men and women in anything but the most general of language would have constituted a breach of decency from which even she must have flinched. It is fortunate therefore, in view of the lack of any precise statement of her thinking that her own marriage provides an admirable illustration of what she had in mind.

George Butler was born in Northampton in 1819, into the governing class that was such a feature of the social structure in the nineteenth century. As a class, they were reared to responsibility: the colonies, the church, the government, education (George's father was headmaster of Harrow), this was their accustomed territory. Though not necessarily religious, they conducted their affairs on a strict code of moral principle. They were not wealthy but sufficiently well-endowed to be able to lead a comfortable and civilised existence. George's interest was primarily in progressive education: he only became a parson to legitimise his moral authority as a teacher, refusing to wear clerical garb which he regarded as an affectation in a

headmaster. A pleasing sense of fun made him a success with his pupils and an excellent father. Altogether a man eminently suited to the role of background husband which is nowadays commonly allocated to the consort of a woman eminent in public affairs, but was then unthinkable.

However, though outwardly the picture might seem conventional enough, in fact what developed was a unique partnership. Josephine was emphatic that throughout the campaign, her husband played a far more important part than that of 'a wise and noble supporter'. Right from the start, 'he had a part in the creation of it, in the formation of the first impulses towards it. Had that work been purely a product of the feminine mind, of a solitary, wounded and revolted heart, it would certainly have lacked some elements essentially to its becoming in any way useful or fruitful. But for him, I should have been much more perplexed than I was'.

That was to be the pattern of their lives together thenceforward. Josephine exclaimed with delight on more than one occasion that her husband exhibited no shred of resentment against the secondary status accorded to him when they appeared at meetings together. Indeed, he actually sought out opportunities to demonstrate publicly his whole-hearted support for her involvement in their joint campaign, once going all the way to the Chatham docks for the specific purpose of showing 'how completely he and she were united in spirit as regarded the work to which she had devoted herself'. He even went so far as to make a public statement, surprisingly in German Switzerland, that 'men should be ready, not only to hold women as their equals but to let those of recognised experience and goodness be at times their guides in moral and spiritual matters'.

At the same time, for all her impassioned commitment to equality for women, Josephine never for one moment went along with the feminists who were then beginning to declare openly their antagonism to men. She was fiercely opposed to talk of a feminist world in which there would be no scope for feminism. The attention she paid to being beautifully turned out on all occasions was evidence of this; her appearance and her behaviour were always calculatedly feminine. She refused to countenance anything that smacked of hostility to men, a view that she shared with many of the leaders of the emancipation movement.

It would be easy to present the Butler marriage as a one-off achievement by exceptional people in exceptional circumstances which had an exceptional outcome. Life's not like that nowadays, we say. It's lovely to read about and we envy them but as a universal target for today, their example is wildly irrelevant. If for no other reason than that the Butlers could rely on an ample supply of domestic help that simply isn't available to us today. (Curiously, for all the torrent of letters they wrote to each other, domestic problems are never mentioned). Nevertheless to adopt this attitude would be a grave misconception. The Butlers stood for a relationship between men and women that challenged every convention in the book; in sociological terms, they re-worked the gender role. They saw their relationship as being that of equals who were yet different, their roles being complementary and inter-changeable. This they did with what struck observers as a kind of holy innocence, simply responding to the requirements of each situation as and when it arose, without thought for convention. Nevertheless the implications were far-reaching, as Josephine's own records demonstrate.

Josephine's first encounter with so-called 'fallen women' took the conventionally

correct form of visiting and leading them in prayer. As I have already recounted, one thing quickly led to another and she and George found themselves involved in an on-going programme of efforts to make such practical response as they could. At which point it would have been usual for a little committee of ladies to be formed to raise funds, their accounts being kindly supervised by George. However Josephine was too intelligent to be content with this: the real target must be the causes that brought women to their parlous state. The invitation to lead the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Act must have presented itself as the obvious next step.

Perhaps for the first time, Josephine realised the realities of the demand for equality. To accept the invitation would involve a total break with feminine convention. To mount the barricades, to speak at public meetings and on such a topic, to give evidence to Parliamentary commissions, this would be a far cry from charity as commonly defined. This was politics, men's stuff, totally improper for a woman. There could be no sheltering behind some strong male figure. What was called for was militancy, efficiency and competence far beyond that normally expected of women. Charity must become the agent of social change, the component that would translate moral outrage into political will. Bravely she summed up her conclusions. What was called for was 'masculine charity' that would be a total contradiction of the convention of charity as being essentially feminine. Charity must be rediscovered, and in this endeavour, women must play an equal part. If that involved them in a challenge to custom and practice, so be it.

I doubt if Josephine ever comprehended the nature of the dilemma to which this conclusion would give rise but she was certainly acutely aware of its practical implications. Her description of the torment she endured in trying to reach a decision about her involvement in the C.D. campaign is a classic example of the difficulty in which women found themselves. How to go boldly forth as an equal partner in an essentially 'masculine' enterprise even though it involved an infringement of her loyalty to her 'feminine' difference. Josephine was fortunate in that she personally was able to reconcile the two in her own life but that does nothing to deny the reality of her experience of the apparently irreconcilable contradiction between the pursuit of equality and the promotion of difference.

This is the dilemma that has dominated the issue of the relationship between men and women throughout the past century, and still does to this day. Take Liverpool, for example. As in Josephine's case, the charitable (many of them non-conformists) were reluctantly compelled to accept that the spiritual civilisation of the poor would have little effect unless steps were taken to ensure that exhortations to live a good life were a viable proposition. Accordingly, social policy focused on the improvement of the physical environment. The outcome was the vast programme of 'Liverpool Firsts' in the field of social reform that earned for the city its reputation as a centre of excellence.

This was men's work; matter for bricks and mortar, for technical and administrative expertise, from which women were automatically excluded. Individual women broke through the barrier and played a pioneering role as did Octavia Hill in housing, for example, but by and large, 'masculine charity' took over. All this called for commendable endeavour but it failed in one respect; the need to ensure that physical betterment was matched by an equal improvement in the quality of life as a whole. This, it was taken for granted, was women's work. The story of how women persisted in their loyalty to the so-called feminine tasks of caring and compassion

forms the bulk of my book on **Charity Discovered**. It makes an extraordinarily gallant story. (Liverpool University Press 1992).

This allocation of responsibilities on the basis of physical difference was challenged by the First World War. After that the kept daughters of the middle class, such as I was myself, could no longer commit themselves to voluntary work because it was essential that they earned their own living. Caring in some form or another being the only occupation of which they had any experience, they found in the developing state welfare services their major opportunity. In effect, women invented social work as a profession for themselves and in so doing, found a recognised if humble place in the world of work. Even so, they were never able to free themselves of the responsibility for caring for the dependent, a task that has become increasingly impracticable and burdensome.

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This is the point we are now at. We still see our world as comprising two separate spheres, that of work that we do for money, and caring that we do for love, each duly allocated to men and women on the basis of their physical sex. The women's movement is still presented as being directed to securing an escape from the treadmill of responsibility for the dependent, a role women fulfill with varying degrees of resentment, satisfaction and guilt. Equality is still taken to mean equality of opportunity for women to work in a man's world in which the struggle to be as good as men borders on entailing a loss of femininity. Charity, we are told, must become a business that gives measurable value for such funds as come its way, its role as the caring conscience of the community diminished near to vanishing point.

The consequences are dire; of Josephine's vision of a new relationship between men and women little trace is evident. In the market place, men and women are competitors, not partners. Women have effected their entry into the man's world of work but there is little sign of a movement in reverse. Dependent on an economy where full employment is no longer assured, men are increasingly marginalised. Too hard pressed at work to play much part in family or community life, their only means of asserting their masculinity would seem to be the acquisition of gross salaries or, at the other end of the scale, the resort to violence. They are effectively disinherited, deprived of their birthright as equal members of the human society in which they have their being.

For women, the situation is confusing in the extreme. They are eager to take up the opportunities for advancement offered by equality in the market place and make remarkable progress in that capacity. At the same time, they are loath to reject the obligations of caring for the dependent for reasons that I believe go far deeper than a mere sense of duty. Yet the fact is that as things are at present organised, they find themselves constantly forced to make choices between the two options. Unable to decide between them, greedy to enjoy the profits of equality to the full, they opt for all manner of alternatives, commuter marriage with an absentee partner, single parenthood, celibacy with sex on the side, transitory co-habitation, the permutations are endless. Sometimes it almost seems as if the relationship between men and women has been reduced to no more than random physical contacts.

Where do we go from here? What relevance has Josephine to the turbulence of our present situation or the unpredictable future that lies ahead? One thing is clear, it

would be futile to suggest that we look to 'Them', those in authority over us, to come to our aid, so strong is the disillusionment with which we regard our current system of governance. Our salvation lies in the fact that social change comes from below; progress in a democracy is never achieved if it is imposed from above. And it is when we turn to ordinary people that we discover an untapped source of energy and hope. The enthusiasm with which the dream that goes under the clumsy label of communitarianism is greeted is proof positive of a rising swell of longing for a life lived for larger purposes than self-aggrandisement. There is a surge in the demand by both men and women for men to play a more meaningful part in parenting and the life of the community generally. There is the extraordinary phenomenon of the claim by women of their 'right' to bear a child, and their voluntary commitment to what must surely be the hardest of lives, that of the single mother. And there is the reassuring fact, which all the laments about the breakdown of family life and the rise in divorce rates tend to conceal, that most children grow up in a two-parent household even though the relationship is not based on a conventional marriage contract.

There is good reason for optimism here. What is urgently needed is a new emancipation movement that will serve to focus and articulate these disparate streams of feeling and harness them to a common cause. Women have established their right to take their place in the community on equal terms though, of course, much remains to be done by way of implementing it in practice. That achieved, the time has come to review the consequences so far as the relationship between men and women is concerned. The goal posts must be moved. The prolonged concentration on equality in the market place has obscured the on-going dilemma of the apparent contradiction between equality and difference. The next task must be to tackle this afresh.

To restore the relationship between men and women to something approaching equilibrium will call for a social policy specifically designed for that purpose. This is not the place to detail the how and where and when of the programme of action that will be called for. All I have attempted to do here is set before you Josephine's vision of what the relationship could and should be. The principle of equal-but-different is her legacy to us. Her ultimate aim was to establish the fundamental right of every member of our human society to strive after self-fulfillment as a unique individual. That this would necessarily involve difference was to her an asset; she regarded the consequent tension as an essential component in the achievement of the balance vital to a creative relationship.

The vision remains constant. Its implementation in a changing world calls for constant innovation and adaptation, and above all, for commitment. Each of us in turn must respond according to the circumstances of the times in which we find ourselves. My generation spent itself on the pursuit of equality, a goal far harder to achieve than we ever anticipated. It is for you who follow after to utilise the advantage we have gained as a launching pad into the future. Your task will not be an easy one. How to strike a balance between the universal search for individual fulfillment and the inescapable fact of physical difference? How to enjoy freedom as an individual without forfeiting the satisfaction of a complementary relationship? The issue lies at the very root of the onward march of the great historical project of human emancipation in which we all must play our part. With Josephine, as your inspiration, you can go forward with courage and conviction.