

## MISSIONARIES, MONSTROSITIES OR MODERN FEMALE FANATICS? (RE)PRESENTING THE IDENTITIES OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY ADVOCATES OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS

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### A "special and peculiar" class of women

In July 1871, the Editor of the *Evening Post*, a major daily New Zealand newspaper, described advocates of women's rights as a "queer lot" of "intensely disagreeable types." This "special and peculiar" class of women was made up of "disappointed and ill tempered old maids" who, never having had the chance of marrying, "vow deadly vengeance upon the whole race of mankind." Amongst this class were also married women who, according to this editor, did not get along with their husbands and who subsequently found a "vent for their spleen in stirring up discontent in the bosoms of the fairer and more amiable portion of the sex" ("Editorial" 1871:2).

He was not alone in his vicious representation of these women. The Editor of the *New Zealand Herald*, considered women's rights advocates to be "not the least dangerous of the social ulcers of the present century" ("Editorial" 1872:2). Other correspondents to the colonial press in New Zealand considered such women not, in fact, to be real women but lunatics ("Nemo" 1871a), female monstrosities, half-man and half-woman ("Janie Plum" 1871), and unsexed due to their exhibiting masculine qualities that betrayed an underlying desire to be men and to usurp the roles and places of men (Jenkins 1869b; Foscari 1871).

These judgements of women who spoke up for the cause of women's rights could not be more distanced from the ways these women thought of themselves. This article presents a case study of two high profile advocates for the cause of women in New Zealand in the latter decades of the nineteenth century: Mary Ann Colclough and Ellen Ellis. Both of these women were passionately committed to advocacy on behalf of women and they considered themselves as engaged in God's work in doing so. Humanitarian Christianity held a central role in the development of Victorian New Zealand settler identities (Stenhouse 2000). It has also been implicated in the exercise of colonial power (Laing and Coleman 1998). The intertwining of religion, gender and ethnicity has received considerable attention over recent years, notably in studies of the development of a "mission of sisterhood" (Haggis 1992), of women as "cultural missionaries" (Ramusack 1990) and of the

role of missionary women as educators (Fitzgerald 1994; Laing and Coleman 1998). It has also been noted that emancipatory ideals often became inspirational for women when these ideals were mediated by evangelical protestant religion (Grimshaw 1994). As this article will show, Mary Ann Colclough's and Ellen Ellis's identities as women's rights advocates were premised upon their religious beliefs and their conviction that man had strayed from God's purpose. One of the ways this manifested itself was through the present inequalities between men and women.<sup>1</sup>

### Self-representations

Despite intense public opprobrium directed at those who identified with the cause of women's rights, both Mary Ann Colclough and Ellen Ellis whole-heartedly embraced the identity of women's advocates. Mary Ann Colclough's statement of this identity was explicit; not only did she refer to herself as "a firm and earnest woman's advocate" but she was "content and grateful to be so considered" by others ("Polly Plum" 1871c:3).<sup>2</sup> Ellen Ellis expressed this identity in terms of her commitment to devote her every effort towards lifting the burden of her "less fortunate sisters" (Ellis, cited Colebrook 1980:146). For both women, their identities as advocates of women's rights were, above all, performance-orientated. It was their active engagement with contemporary social issues, be it through writing, public speaking, or providing practical assistance to women, which shaped their understandings of what being an advocate of women's rights signified.

The predominant imagery in Mary Ann Colclough's self-disclosures regarding her commitment to women's rights was drawn from religious discourses. She talked about her "conversion" to this cause, a cause she described as "high and holy," and as being "the cause of right and truth" (Colclough 1871:3; "Polly Plum" 1871c:3, 1871a:3). Her commitment to this cause was unequivocal: as a missionary engaged in God's work, she was prepared, if necessary, to be a martyr in His service:

You will believe that I am true when I declare on my honor [sic] as a Christian woman that dearly as I love my life, and many and close as are the ties that bind me to it, I would this day, gladly and gratefully lay it down, if by doing so I would serve the great work which, next to my God, claims my highest service. No Missionary ever yet went amongst the heathen, who was ever more firmly convinced that he was doing God's service, and working to His honor [sic] and glory, than I am convinced that I am doing God's

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<sup>1</sup> For a full discussion of Mary Ann Colclough's and Ellen Ellis's analyses of women's situation see Coleman (1996).

<sup>2</sup> "Polly Plum" was Mary Ann Colclough's *nom de plume*.

best work in the path I have chosen to follow. I fully believe, and am convinced, that neither I or my little ones will suffer in this enlightened nineteenth century, by my carrying out my earnest convictions of right; but even if it were otherwise, and I should be counted 'worthy to suffer,' I hope and believe the strength will be given to say, 'Even so Father, for so it seemeth good in Thy sight, not my will but Thine be done.' ("Polly Plum" 1871c:3)

In the context of what Mary Ann Colclough considered appropriate occupations for women and men, identifying herself as a missionary in God's service provides a critical insight into her understanding and construction of her identity as an advocate of women's rights. In September 1871, her name was put forward to be appointed missionary to the Mt. Eden hospital and gaol. At this time she publicly stated that had she been born a man she would likely have entered the ministry and engaged in missionary work. It was only because her reading of the scriptures indicated that only men should be allowed in the ministry that she did not embrace this vocation ("Polly Plum" 1869b). Hence, while to be a missionary in the religious sense of saving souls was something Mary Ann Colclough did not consider to be appropriate for herself on the basis of her sex, to be a missionary in the social sense of dedicating one's life to the cause of women's rights - the "holy cause" of "truth" - was, in her view, an appropriate calling for a woman, provided it was based on conviction and commitment.

In attributing the highest of possible motivations for her advocacy of women's rights, Mary Ann Colclough's self-identification as a missionary in God's service was very subversive. In using features of conventional discourse regarding missionary work to legitimise her political advocacy of women's rights, she challenged the boundaries of socially approved female benevolence. Her challenge to the social regulation of women's involvement in moral and social reform, however, went further than this in her claim that women were at least as capable as men to hold public positions of authority within social, political, *and* religious institutions ("Editorial Note" 1872).

Mary Ann Colclough's insistence that she would willingly die for the cause of women's rights met with a particularly hostile response from one writer to the newspaper. Under the signature "Nemo," he wrote:

Polly Plum fancies that she is a martyr, and would like everyone else to think the same. I verily believe that it would please Polly beyond measure [to] see men so incensed with her as to violently seize her, bind her to a stake, and reduce her body to ashes; but Polly may rely upon it, that she will never fill a martyr's grave, at any rate by the hands of the tyrant men; the only restraint (if any)

that would be likely to be placed upon her would be at the Whau.<sup>3</sup>  
("Nemo" 1871a:3)

Never one to shy away from her critics, Mary Ann Colclough wrote to the newspapers to respond to Nemo's insinuation that advocacy of the cause of women's rights was lunacy and his accusation that she was making insane assertions with regard to herself and women's position. She wrote:

As to residence at the Whau, if all the believers in Woman's Rights in Auckland were sent up there to keep me company, we should be a very pleasant party, composed of a large number of intelligent men and women, and there would not be a few grass-widowers in town. "Nemo," in many respects evidently a sensible intelligent man, makes a mistake when he tries to put down Woman's Rights by that sort of argument, insults always return upon the insulter, and when the movement has spread so widely, and among so many intellectual and excellent people, to characterize the advocacy of the cause as lunacy, is an unpardonable insult and can only result from ignorance (on this point at any rate). ("Polly Plum" 1871e:3)

Although Ellen Ellis's identity as a missionary in God's work was not articulated as directly as Mary Ann Colclough's, it was similarly based on a passionate commitment to her religious principles. Ellen Ellis also drew on conventional discourses regarding missionary work as well as discourses of predestination to legitimise her advocacy of women's rights. For Ellen Ellis, her identity as an advocate of women's rights was articulated in terms of a process of coming to terms with difficult aspects of her own life. As a child she had been labelled an "incorrigible dunce" by her school-teachers and her family, and had been treated as peculiar because of her resistance to the codes of manners and behaviours expected of young ladies. Her subsequent marriage had been very difficult, due in great part to the domineering behaviour of her husband, his disrespect for her religious convictions, his abuse of alcohol, and his speculative business deals. As well as these hardships, two of her three children had died at very young ages. Over time, Ellen Ellis came to the conclusion that God had denied her a happy marriage so that she would not become complacent with her life. She gradually accepted that there was a divine plan behind every one of the difficulties she had faced in her life, including the premature deaths of her sons. She believed that God had chosen her to suffer so that she would be fitter and stronger to fulfil His purpose for her:

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<sup>3</sup> The Lunatic Asylum.

I saw that this had been predestined for me from the beginning. God had denied me a happy marriage, so that I should not become inturned upon my own satisfactory life. He had taken Alec & Little Tom to Himself, to free me from the responsibility of looking after them. He *intended* me to drink to the dregs of sorrow's cup. He had given me my present freedom, so that I could devote my every effort towards lifting the burden of my less fortunate sisters. This being so, how could I fail in my purpose? (Ellis, cited Colebrook 1980:146)

In contrast to Mary Ann Colclough who constructed her identity as a missionary in God's work as a calling she had chosen, Ellen Ellis constructed her God-given mission to help her "less fortunate sisters" as something she was destined to do. By providing a meaningful framework within which to understand her whole life up to that point and beyond, this identity as an agent in God's work was, for Ellen Ellis, a strategy of survival.

In some respects, however, this identity was also a strategy of resistance. The basis of Ellen Ellis's perceived difference between herself and her "less fortunate sisters" was that, despite her childhood and life experiences, she had managed to empower herself through education and the realisation that women had a key role to play in the divine plan for the moral universe. Her strong political analysis of women's position as wives and mothers, her commitment to empowering women with practical knowledge, and her efforts to organise women to speak out publicly on controversial issues in the political arena were all outcomes of her identity in her God-given work of advocating on behalf of women. It is in these respects that her identity as an advocate for women's rights can be understood to have operated as a powerful strategy of resistance that, although cast in the language of philanthropic service, clearly challenged the boundaries of socially approved female activity.

Far from being "modern female fanatics," neither Mary Ann Colclough nor Ellen Ellis advocated social rebellion. While Ellen Ellis stressed that changes needed to take place in the hearts and souls of women and men, Mary Ann Colclough insisted:

I find generally that my opponents persist in considering me a rabid revolutionist. All my protestations to the contrary, all that I have written with respect to the responsibilities, duties, and obligations of wives, all this is utterly disregarded and passed over, and I am treated as though I advocated social rebellion on the part of women. Nothing can be more unjust or further from the truth. ("Polly Plum" 1871a: 3)

She did believe, however, that the more educated women became, the greater would be their objection to legal subjection and they would be the less likely to submit to current social arrangements. She also maintained that educated wives, if treated like children, would rebel (“Polly Plum” 1871d, 1870c).

Mary Ann Colclough’s and Ellen Ellis’s identifications as missionaries emphasised the new “doctrines” they sought to “preach” regarding the basis for new forms of social organization. In this respect, their identities as missionaries were provisional upon their critiques of women’s place and role within society.

### **Disappointed and ill-tempered old maids**

One of the charges levelled at women’s rights advocates was that they were either bitter and ill-tempered because they had not married or that they had not been able to have a successful marriage because of their personal attributes. There is no doubt that neither Mary Ann Colclough nor Ellen Ellis had easy marriages, both having married men who, while not violent or abusive toward them, were, at the very least, not competent providers for their families. Mary Ann Colclough recalled one occasion where she and her two young children, both under the age of five, were left sitting on the bare floor, their furniture having been repossessed to pay for her husband’s debts. Likewise, Ellen Ellis took over the family finances after a number of occasions on which she had had to hold back the debtors from the door.

Although they had faced difficult circumstances in their own marriages, both looked beyond their individual circumstances to explain what was at the heart of the issue. For Mary Ann Colclough, the problem lay in the fact that upon marriage, a woman “completely sinks her identity” by placing every aspect of her life “at the absolute disposal of another” (“Polly Plum” 1870a:7). It was precisely because she had fulfilled her primary duties as wife and mother that she could claim some authority for her advocacy of women’s rights. Under her *nom de plume* Polly Plum she wrote:

Had I been an old maid I never would have ventured to be a public advocate. The fact of my never having married would, in a prejudiced community, have quite destroyed my influence, no matter how sincere and earnest and talented I might have been. The fact that I fulfilled a wife’s duties to the best of my ability, and now try to be a good mother to my children, and am a woman’s advocate from conviction only, has its effect with many. (“Polly Plum” 1871f: 3)

Hence, while being critical of the restraints of marriage, Mary Ann Colclough did not hesitate to make use of the status ascribed to married women to consolidate her authority in advocating for the extension of women’s rights, including the rights

of married women. Her identity as an advocate of women's rights was, therefore, both *provisional upon* and *in resistance to* her ascribed identity as a widow and a mother.

The central issue for Ellen Ellis, on the other hand, was the non-identity of married women. She wrote of married women being denied the "subtle potency of recognised being" by becoming a possession of their husbands upon marriage (Ellis 1882:63). Like Mary Ann Colclough, she had lived the contradiction of having to assume responsibility for aspects of her family's economic security while being denied the recognition, status, and privileges that traditionally accompanied those responsibilities when performed by men.

### **Identity as "an acutely double-edged weapon"**

Mary Ann Colclough's and Ellen Ellis's self-identifications as advocates of women's rights were constructed against processes of subjectification. Denise Riley has written of identity as being "an acutely double-edged weapon" which is both risky and fundamentally dependent upon the context in which it is invoked. She cautions that "the closeness between an identity and a derogatory identification may, again always in specific contexts, resemble that between being a subject and the process of subjectification" (Riley 1992:122). In considering the impact of derogatory identifications made by nineteenth century opponents of women's rights, my interest is in the ways in which these may have been incorporated and resisted in the positive identifications each of these women constructed regarding their advocacy of the cause of women's rights.

Despite their analyses of women's collectivity as a "subject class," Mary Ann Colclough and Ellen Ellis each retained a sense of confidence and empowerment in their own identities as women. To the present-day observer, the most outstanding feature of their self-identifications is the passion and assuredness with which they identified with the cause of women's rights amid a constant barrage of negative and abusive public opinion directed toward advocates of this cause and the cause itself. This confidence and unflinching commitment belied any suggestion that they were simply "disappointed and ill-tempered old maids" intent on venting their spleen.

With regard to popular attitudes toward women's rights advocates in New Zealand during the late 1860s and early 1870s, however, the press was anything but quiet. These "strong-minded women" (Fairchild 1870:2; "Old Practical" 1871:3; Foscarini 1871:3; "Editorial" 1872:2), the "shrieking sisterhood" ("Editorial Note" 1872:3), were transgressing the fundamental rule of woman as quiet, passive, inessential Other. For this reason, they were not considered to be "real" women, but were lunatics and female monstrosities. However noisy these "unnatural" women were, they were not deemed by opponents of women's rights to constitute a significant portion of the "fair sex" and hence their outbursts and demands could not be held as representative of their sex (G.M. 1870; "Old Practical" 1871; "Editorial"

1871; "Janie Plum" 1871; "Nemo" 1871b). They were simply the voices of a few isolated individual women, dissatisfied with their own situations and with a grudge toward the opposite sex.

Mary Ann Colclough and Ellen Ellis were certainly strong-minded women; however this was not a quality that they considered unsexed them or made them more like men. Mary Ann Colclough embraced the description of herself as a strong-minded woman but rejected the accusation of applying "wholesale censure" to men. In response to her opponents, she wrote

For my part, I can speak favourably of the intelligence and kindness of men generally. I have made many friends among the opposite sex by my advocacy of "Woman's Rights." ("Polly Plum" 1871f: 3)

She spoke freely and warmly of the personal support and encouragement she had received from men, maintaining that:

Many men are ready to give us all that a reasonable common-sense woman could ask; some men would even give us more than I think women are at all entitled to; and, as a rule, men are much better and kinder than the laws. ("Polly Plum" 1870d: 2)

Under her *nom de plume* "A Woman," Ellen Ellis took correspondent "Fairchild" to task for being "unjust and ungenerous to the 'strong-minded'" ("A Woman" 1870:3). She adamantly stated: "I never believe the ravings attributed to strong-minded women; I don't think women are such fools" ("A Woman" 1870b:2). On another occasion she wrote: "Oh! if men had but the sense to drop that word 'masculine' when speaking and writing about clever women" ("A Woman" 1870c:3).

To the contrary, their primary identities were *as women*, albeit based on a different construction of womanhood than that espoused within dominant discourses. Although each was critical of the abuses of power at the hands of individual men, neither of them could be accused of holding a personal grudge toward members of the opposite sex. To Mary Ann Colclough, "It is the system, not the men" that was at fault ("Polly Plum" 1869a:9). While Ellen Ellis was critical of many aspects of social organisation, she believed that the fault lay in the hearts and minds of individuals. But she did believe that men were, by nature, more susceptible to debased selfishness. In her view, men were innately endowed with more weaknesses of character than women and this was manifest in an inclination toward self-love, "woman-slavery" and "drink-slavery" (Ellis 221). These individual failings were exacerbated by the social and legal system which denied women "the



subtle potency of recognised being," gave husbands complete power over their wives, and placed women in a position which was inimical to God's divine plan.

It was Mary Ann Colclough, however, who encountered the most intense and hostile backlash for her personal advocacy of women's rights. In some respects this is not surprising given the very high public profile she had as Polly Plum, contributing articles and letters to the Auckland newspapers on almost a daily basis for several years. Correspondent "Jellaby Pater" considered her letters to be "full of sound and fury" yet signifying nothing ("Pater" 3) while "Nemo" accused her of making "insane assertions with regard to herself and woman's position" ("Nemo" 1871a:3). She was variously accused of plagiarism,<sup>4</sup> of "dishing up truisms in a new garb" (Jenkins 1869a:5) and charged with want of modesty ("Editorial Note" 1871).

### Contemporaries in the Cause

As contemporaries in the cause of women, the fact that Mary Ann Colclough and Ellen Ellis did not appear to work together in their advocacy of women's rights merits some explanation. Sharing a commitment to ameliorating the abuses of alcohol, these two women did serve together on the Auckland committee of the Total Abstinence Society from January 1872 until Mary Ann Colclough left Auckland in September 1872. They were certainly aware of each other's correspondence to the Auckland newspapers but, due to their use of pennames, would not have been aware of the actual personalities behind this writing. In October 1870 there was a brief exchange between "Polly Plum" and "A Woman" in the letters to the editor column in the *Daily Southern Cross*.<sup>5</sup> But whereas Mary Ann Colclough's identity as "Polly Plum" was revealed in June 1871 when she began to deliver public lectures on women's rights, Ellen Ellis's identity as "A Woman" was never made public and, by the end of 1870, she had stopped corresponding to the newspapers under this penname.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, while Mary Ann Colclough was at the height of her public profile as an advocate of women's rights in Auckland in the

<sup>4</sup> An article entitled "The Indisposition of Young Men to Marry" published in the *Auckland Weekly News* and wrongly attributed to "Polly Plum" led to a charge of plagiarism. Polly Plum's response to this charge was vehement; she stated: "Such a charge to an honest mind is most monstrous; 'Veritas' clearly accuses me of literary *theft*, which is *morally* as bad as any other kind of robbery. I have *never* been guilty of anything approaching it. Bad or good, my productions are absolutely *genuine*. I declare this *solemnly* on the honour of a lady" ("Polly Plum" 1870b:4). See also "Notices to Correspondents" 1870.

<sup>5</sup> This correspondence was initiated by "Polly Plum" who wrote to distance herself from the views expressed by "A Woman" in a recent letter to the newspaper. See "A Woman" 1870a, "Polly Plum" 1870d, "A Woman" 1870b.

<sup>6</sup> By the time Ellen Ellis's overtly feminist novel *Everything is Possible to Will* was published under her own name in 1884, Mary Ann Colclough had long since left Auckland and was likely unaware of the publication of the novel as circulation was limited due to Ellen Ellis's son having destroyed as many copies as possible because of the unflattering fictionalised account it gave of his father.

early 1870s, Ellen Ellis's public profile emerged around opposition to the Contagious Diseases legislation in the early 1880s, by which time Mary Ann Colclough had left Auckland.

The key explanatory reason for the lack of interaction between these two women on issues of women's rights is due to the nature of the women's movement in New Zealand at this period. Prior to the establishment of the Women's Christian Temperance Union in 1885, the women's movement in New Zealand was very diverse, had multiple aims, and was characterised by its lack of a readily identifiable organised face. Activism on the part of women of European descent<sup>7</sup> tended to develop around specific goals such as the establishment of a college for girls or the eligibility of women to be voted onto temperance committees and the like. For this reason, feminist historians have tended to view the likes of Mary Ann Colclough as one of a few "isolated advocates" (Macdonald 1993: 1) who were active prior to the establishment of organised groups working towards the more coherent agendas associated with the "first wave" of the women's movement.

At the height of Mary Ann Colclough's public advocacy of women's rights, an unnamed individual wrote to the newspapers to assert that any change in the situation of women would "be brought about silently and quietly, by the efforts of women, individually, to retain the affection of their husbands far more surely than by any noisy demonstration or agitation" (G.M. 1870:6). Mary Ann Colclough and Ellen Ellis quite clearly disagreed with such a view. They believed that what others referred to as "noisy demonstration" and "agitation" could effect changes in public opinion and attitudes that would lead to changes in women's individual and collective situation. So, while each pursued individual solutions to aspects of their own situations with which they were dissatisfied, they also used their identities as advocates of women's rights to effect changes which they hoped would ultimately improve the material situations of *all* women. Both were concerned with bringing what were generally considered to be "private" experiences into the public domain and thereby fostering some kind of "feminist" consciousness amongst women and "fair-minded" men.

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<sup>7</sup> For nga wahine Maori (indigenous women), activism tended to centre on attempts to regain tribal lands confiscated by the British Crown (see Rei 1993).

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