
Organising for Socialism: Mary Bridges Adams and IWCE

This article by Jane Martin is based on a talk given by her at the IWCE meeting in London on 4/2/12 and on her book Making Socialists. Mary Bridges Adams and the Fight for Knowledge and Power, 1855-1939

Introduction

Mary Bridges Adams was a figure of the extra-parliamentary left, a believer in revolution devoted to class struggle during the pioneering days of British socialism. She has fascinated me ever since I read her blistering speech as an elected member of the London School Board (LSB) in December 1897. Trying to gain support for the feeding of schoolchildren, with enormous guts she effectively told her upper-middle-class opponents that they could not possibly imagine what it was like to be poor. Created under the terms of the 1870 Education Act, the LSB was the world's largest educational parliament and Britain's most influential school board. Mary was one of 55 elected members controlling nearly 400 schools. In re-creating her experience as a participant within the labour movement and as a campaigner for improvements in working-class education, I want to address legacies and make continuities, arguing for continued attention to a radical 'useable' past.

Marxist thinking inspired Mary's dreams of a better world. Becoming a socialist was experienced as a momentous event, described as crossing the river of fire. She developed her political ideas under the influence of William Morris, British writer,

designers, artist and socialist. Morris described the means to achieving socialism as 'First, educating people into desiring it, next organising them into claiming it effectively' and Mary, who later described herself as 'an unattached Communist', said she had Morris's 'blessings and good wishes' when she became involved in popular educational politics. Mary spent seven years as an elected member of the LSB and by 1900 she was well known for her efforts to extend the school life of the majority of children. She excelled as a speechmaker and this was evident in George Bernard Shaw's remark in his letter of condolence to her son, 'what an orator'.

The intention is to focus on Mary's propaganda work, in order to explore her contribution to the main project of 'making socialists' from the standpoint of gender. An appreciation of Mary's vision not only allows for an examination of areas of experience lost in grander narratives, but also serves as a context for a fresh set of perspectives on the place of the educational question in the study of British socialism. I have crafted my story in five parts: landscape of a socialist; labour politics in London; radical struggles over education; independent working-class self-organisation; political education of working women.

Landscape of a socialist

Mary Bridges Adams was born into a small Welsh working-class family on 19 October 1855. Her father, William Daltry, had moved from maritime Pembrokeshire to work as an engine fitter in Monmouthshire, a new boom area of iron and coal industry. Historians draw a ready comparison between the nascent Welsh industrial towns, which were sprouting up, and the frontier settlements of the American west. Chartism, the mass movement for democratic rights, which dominated British domestic politics in the later 1830s and 1840s, followed in the wake of this social and economic change. Within living memory, Mary's birthplace had been a meeting point in the Newport Rising of 1839 when mine owners reputedly hid themselves down pits. Mary's mother died in childbirth in 1858 and the Daltry family moved to North East England sometime after her father's second marriage. There, Mary was apprenticed as a pupil teacher, working as a trainee in a local school and studying in the evening. Her father had taken a post as a boilermaker at the Elswick factory established by Sir William Armstrong. Armstrong's wages were good by contemporary standards, especially for the skilled trades. She spent the early part of her working life in the terraced community that appeared on the slopes above the river Tyne, part of the social landscape of the most militant and politically active sections of the working class. Early life in the South Wales coalfield vitally informed Mary's later politics; they were also a product of popular radicalism on Tyneside. As an adolescent, she saw the campaign by the Nine Hours League to reduce the traditional working week of engineering workers in 1871.

Mary started her working life in schools organised under the 1870 Education Act. An enormous expansion of elementary education was underway which meant the opportunities for promotion were tremendous. Mary became a head teacher in her twenties, working in the cities of Birmingham, London and Newcastle. Unusually, for a woman from her social background, she went on to teach in a Woolwich high school. She was working for an external London BA (open to women from 1878) and probably met mathematics tutor Walter Bridges Adams, whom she married in 1887, as a joint participant in socialist politics. Walter was among the tiny band of socialists, British and European, settled in London who signed the Socialist League's manifesto, *To Socialists*, issued on 13 January 1885.

Walter came from a background of religious dissent and political radicalism. His father was William Bridges Adams, political writer, inventor and manufacturer of railway carriages. A leading figure in the

radical Unitarian network centred on South Place Chapel in Finsbury in the 1830s and 1840s, William used journalism to advocate divorce by consent and schemes to liberate women from housework. His writings on political reform helped shape the politics of his youngest children, Walter and Hope, who qualified as a doctor and went on to combine a career in gynaecology with politics, marriage and motherhood. Living and working in Germany, the main centre of European Marxism, Hope completed the first English translation of August Bebel's *Woman in the Past, Present and Future*, published in 1885.

After their marriage, Mary and Walter went to live in Harrow where their son, William, was born in 1889. By the 1890s, they had made their home in the London borough of Greenwich. Politics loomed large in William's upbringing. William heard his mother speak on socialist platforms and remembered his father, whom he described as 'a devotee of German opera', singing *Don Giovanni* at their piano.

Labour Politics in London

From the 1890s, the trajectory of Mary's political activities drew her into the orbit of trade union and Labour leaders, prominent socialists and the revolutionary activists from the Russian Empire who sought refuge in London. In 1894, she was asked to fight the triennial elections for the LSB for the Greenwich district, a vast ward covering the parliamentary constituencies of Deptford, Greenwich, Lewisham and Woolwich. Her political power lay in socialist Woolwich and her story is inseparably linked to the making of Woolwich Labour Party. Several distinctive features contributed to Labour's (and Mary's) success in this particular London borough. These include: late-Victorian Woolwich was peculiar in being a working-class community, largely dependent on the Woolwich dockyard, the Arsenal and military barracks; there was a large core of skilled workers; the relative absence of commuters - railways (1849), Thames passenger steamboats had ceased, yellow horse-drawn trams lit by oil lamps moved people between Greenwich and Plumstead; the Blackwall Tunnel opened in May 1897 helped coordinate and mobilise activity across the Thames.

Woolwich supported the largest Co-operative Society in the London suburbs, covering the south-east London area from Greenwich and Lewisham to Erith. Besides being a commercial success, the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society fostered a spirit of self-improvement through its Education Committee and its Women's Co-operative

Guilds, as well as providing support for a Labour political programme. Community was at the heart of its activities and Mary joined in, giving talks and lectures, chairing discussions and helping to organise a picture loan exhibition called 'Art for the Workers' in Woolwich Polytechnic, opened by the artist Walter Crane. Reading rooms and study groups flourished, museums and exhibitions, choral and orchestral societies, amateur dramatics and a growing number of parks all provided opportunities for 'improving' recreation.

Making socialism a living reality was a way of life and this enthusiasm was unleashed on the borough at the regular Sunday morning meetings at the Arsenal Gates. One of the speakers later captured the tremendous political optimism: 'Sufficient unto the day was the faith and our devotion to it. The campaign was more like a religious revival than a political agitation, and the singing of labour hymns at every meeting contributed to the feeling that we were the pioneers of a new faith'. It was this time and this place that made Mary's political candidature viable.

Radical struggles over education: conceptual framing

For Mary, free public education was essential for a democratic socialist society. At the same time, she argued for a critical political education outside the state system. There is a seeming contradiction between, on the one hand, her emphasis on the right of poor and working-class children to equal access to state-supported schooling, and, on the other, her belief that working-class people need an overtly political education to give them the tools of economic and political analysis that can serve them in the class struggle. To illuminate this contradiction, I use the distinction made by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in their edited volume *Unpopular Education* between what they call 'substitutional' and 'statist' strategies. By substitutional approaches the CCCS refers to strategies to create sites of popular education outside the state system - these seek to develop alternative analyses and knowledge in opposition to the dominant beliefs that serve and reproduce capitalist hegemony. The 'statist' approach, on the other hand, sees access to existing educational institutions as central and argues for equity in educational provisions for all children.

While these two approaches can be in sharp conflict (as in the disagreement over working men's education at Ruskin Hall), part of Mary's value as a historical subject is to show that it is possible also to fight on both fronts.

She called for: a secular state education system that was coherent and democratic, free and compulsory for all (a broad highway not an elitist scholarship ladder); a maximum class size of 30; well-trained teachers and equal resources for all children guaranteed by the state; the raising of the school leaving age to 16, free school meals and medical services, and state maintenance. She opposed the use of corporal punishment and proposed the teaching of peace studies. All these measures should be funded through the restoration of the educational endowments provided by philanthropists for the education of 'the poor' and misappropriated by schools in the private sector during the second half of the nineteenth century. The Gas Workers' 'expert' on the endowments question, in the 1900s she established the National Labour Education League to move the labour movement toward a coherent political standpoint on education policy. The Conservative Education Act of 1902 transferred the powers and functions of the school boards to council committee administration, to build up a state-supported system of selective secondary schools, and provide further assistance for faith schools. A second education bill dealt with the London question, with the setting up of the London County Council (LCC) Education Committee - thought to be a more effective and less radical way of running London's education service. When the LCC took over in April 1904, the new education committee consisted of 38 elected men and five co-opted women, because women could not then vote or be elected to county councils. The London Trades Council lobbied for Mary's inclusion as a co-opted member but she, like other potential troublemakers, was excluded. Mary never again served as an elected public figure.

Independent working-class self-organisation

Mary's conception of education for the workers was rooted in the Marxist studies promoted by the earlier Socialist League slogan: educate - agitate - organise. Deeply suspicious of the strategy and tactics of Labour's parliamentary leaders, she would resist and challenge the assumption that manoeuvre and compromise were essential to the furtherance of Labour's position. Her preference was for direct action mounted by rank-and-file agitators and Marxist pedagogues. This included support for a strongly political and agitational conception of adult education, identifying a distinctively socialist or working-class curriculum. Young, class-conscious students took up the refrain during the Ruskin College revolt

in 1908, demanding an independent organisation and curriculum based on Marxism. 'Do you suffer from class consciousness? Come to Oxford and be cured' was among the pithy slogans the 'rebels' used during their dispute with the authorities.

Mary criticised Ruskin College's education practice, saying it was based on values such as competition rather than 'brotherhood'. Beyond a powerful undercurrent of suspicion and ambivalence at the liberal adult education philosophy offered by Ruskin, Mary would become the earliest, most persistent critic of the Workers' Educational Association (WEA). She had little time for the kind of partnership with the bourgeois state that it offered and less for the trade unionists who advocated it. Launched in Oxford in August 1903, the WEA institutionalised a philanthropic, humanistic and radical-liberal conception of adult education. The League of the Plebs was set up in October 1908 to organise education nationally and to promote a closer identification of the college with the Labour movement. Mary was among the two hundred members who attended the League's first annual meeting, in August 1909. Miners' leader Noah Ablett moved the main resolution for the principle of independence in working class education, and Mary seconded in what Plebs Magazine described as 'a fighting speech of great power and force'.

Political education of working women

Caught up in these activities Mary took a leading part before 1914, fighting for the restoration of the educational endowments that had been stolen from the poor, and institution building to ensure that more working-class women than previously got some kind of political education. In July 1912, an advertisement appeared on the front page of Justice [ie the paper of the Social Democratic Federation]. It contained proposals for a Working Women's College organised by Mrs Bridges Adams. She wanted to empower working women so they might make their presence felt 'as propagandists, as representatives on public bodies; and as members of management committees of the trade unions in which women are organised'. At the same time, she thought that change could be achieved through the provision of 'a centre of organised working-class effort' to press the education demands of the trade union movement, which could be seen as 'a link between the Labour Movement and the most forward spirits in the Feminist Movement'.

Bebel House opened in the spring of 1913 in a house close to the Central Labour College for men

at London's Earls Court. It was to serve essentially as both hall of residence and educational space from which to inaugurate other working women's colleges throughout the country, operating on the principle of parent-groups and worker-tutors, applied in terms of an organised educational institution. Former mill worker and novelist Ethel Carnie spent time there and established the Bebel House Rebel Pen Club. Rebecca West, who had a celebrated career as a writer ahead of her, saw education such as Bebel House offered as essential to give the woman worker the self-confidence she needed 'to form the most aggressive quarter of the Trade Union Congress instead of merely the distinguished handful that now represent their sex'. She commented on Mary's year of 'eager organising' and her vital role in facilitating real progress for working women. Mary was certainly a woman of immense energy but the financial position of Bebel House was by no means secure and its demise occurred fairly swiftly.

In the 1920s Mary revived discussion of a new international socialist education movement. She fostered a continuing consciousness of the class struggle, combined with insistence 'on the right and duty of the organised workers to provide and control their own teaching in economic science'. An article she placed in the A.S.E. Journal and Report brought in Ethel Carnie, now enjoying a celebrated career as a writer, including her best-seller *Helen of Four Gates*. Unlike the wreck of the Versailles settlement, said Mary, this movement is based on four, not fourteen, points, 'and as they have not been drafted by politicians and diplomats, they mean what they say, and say what they mean'.

If anything, the war years strengthened Mary's commitment to internationalism and she retained the capacity to imagine an alternative to the status quo. Her educational goal remained the foundation of an International Federation of Socialist and Labour Colleges. She also planned an International Working-Class Students Union, an international system of travelling scholarships and an International Socialist Library. To evoke interest among the rank and file generally it was Ethel who launched an appeal for £2,000, while Mary dangled the promise of matched funding from sympathetic friends in the Soviet Union. Again and again Mary pressed the case for workers' control at a time when the WEA was campaigning for reforms within the state. Unlike Labour reformists, she consistently linked grievances over the university and public school endowments to a revolutionary political end.

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Conclusion

Mary was an early advocate of a cultural praxis that involved reforming institutions so as to change the trajectory of political consciousness as it was forged in early twentieth century Britain. The experience was a contradictory one but her femaleness was not the only part in this. There was also her preparedness to challenge orthodoxy demonstrated by the courage and conviction that compelled Mary to fight for socialism in Britain, whatever the circumstances. Relational capital was crucial to the legitimacy she carried within the National Labour Education League, the Plebs League and the Russian Political Prisoners and Exiles' Relief Committee.

We know she troubled the establishment elite, but in making sense of Mary Bridges Adams we need to question the conventional wisdoms, to go back to the margins, to listen to the testimony of those to whom she was closest. This woman never altered her principles. Politics determined her whole life and she presented a remarkably consistent record of outspoken advocacy in a succinct and cogent writing style. Looking back, Russian feminist Alexandra Kollontai paid testimony to her strength of character: 'You were always so good and kind to me, the real revolutionary comrade at the time when many did not venture to know us'. An outstanding feature of her personality is the sheer energy and enthusiasm that she brought to the fight for her political beliefs. Above all else, Mary Bridges Adams believed in the full potential of education to fashion a socialist future. In claiming her right to democratic participation, she blazed a trail for other working-class women to follow.

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