

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: Sheffield Hallam University		
Unit of Assessment: UOA28 - History		
Title of case study: Feminism, anti-slavery and dissent: A radical heritage for today		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2007 - 2017		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Professor Clare Midgley	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Research Professor of History	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: March 2006-December 2020
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2015 - 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		

1. Summary of the impact

Research by Professor Clare Midgley underpinned a successful £1.73 million bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund, enabling the restoration of Newington Green Unitarian Church in London, a historic international hub of religious and political dissent, and its relaunch as heritage, education and community centre.

It advanced a successful campaign for erection on the Green of the first public memorial to pioneering feminist Mary Wollstonecraft. Research also resulted in more inclusive understandings of Britain's anti-slavery heritage through podcasts for Historic England (1,254 listeners and 4,000 article shares), and programme notes for *The Whip*, an acclaimed new play about abolition for the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC).



2. Underpinning research

Professor Clare Midgley has undertaken extensive research into the intersecting histories of women's anti-slavery activism, the emergence of modern feminism, and the role of Unitarians in the radical transnational networks of religious dissent and radical social reform. Her work, based on rigorous archival research, has offered the following new insights:

The origins of modern feminism: Midgley's research has exposed the impact of empire on the development of feminism in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain, illuminating how key early feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft linked the rights of British women to their opposition to colonial slavery, while simultaneously contributing to the development of Orientalist stereotypes about the oppressed 'eastern' woman enslaved in the harem (**R1**).

Women and the consumer boycotts of slave produce: Midgley's research has shown how women took a lead in bringing the politics of anti-slavery into the domestic sphere and played a vital role in creating an anti-slavery public. It has illuminated the role of consumer boycotts in

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engaging ordinary people and making the cause part of their everyday lives through their food consumption and domestic sociability (R1).

Anti-slavery and feminism: by comparing British and American abolition movements, Midgley has highlighted the distinctive nature of the relationship between abolitionism and feminism in Britain, throwing new light on its roots in the differing political contexts of the two nations and the differing relationship of black women to the two movements (R2).

Religious dissent, political dissent and anti-slavery radicalism: Midgley's research into the dissenting religious background of Elizabeth Heyrick, author of the influential pamphlet *Immediate not Gradual Abolition*, illuminates the leading role of Quakers and Unitarians in the anti-slavery movement and on the relationship between religious dissent, political radicalism and anti-slavery radicalism (R3).

Unitarians, transnational inter-faith networks and cosmopolitan feminisms: Midgley's most recent research reveals how British Unitarians led the emergence of a cosmopolitan strand of modern feminism. Simultaneously, it uncovers the roles played by western Unitarian and Indian women in pioneering inter-faith dialogue through a network of religious dissenters and social reformers linking British and American Unitarians with members of an influential Hindu movement for religious and social reform, the Brahmo Samaj (R4, R5, R6).

3. References to the research

- R1. Clare Midgley, *Feminism and Empire. Women Activists in Imperial Britain, 1790-1865* (Routledge, 2007), especially Chapter 1: 'The "woman question" in Imperial Britain', pp. 13-40 and Chapter 2: 'Sweetness and power: the domestic woman and anti-slavery politics', pp. 41-64.
- R2. Clare Midgley, 'British abolition and feminism in transatlantic perspective', in K.K. Sklar and J. Brewer (eds), *Women's Rights and Transatlantic Antislavery in the Era of Emancipation* (Yale University Press, 2007), pp 121-142.
- R3. Clare Midgley, 'The dissenting voice of Elizabeth Heyrick: an exploration of the links between gender, religious dissent and anti-slavery radicalism', in Elizabeth J. Clapp and Julie Roy Jeffrey (eds) *Women, Dissent and Anti-Slavery in Britain and America* (Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 88-110.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199585489.003.0005>
- R4. Clare Midgley: 'Mary Carpenter and the Brahmo Samaj of India: a transnational perspective on social reform in the age of empire', *Women's History Review*, 22.3 (2013), pp. 363-385. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2012.726121>
- R5. Clare Midgley, 'The Cosmopolitan Biography of English Religious Liberal, Feminist and Writer, Sophia Dobson Collet' in J. Haggis, M. Allen, C. Midgley and F. Paisley, *Cosmopolitan Lives on the Cusp of Empire. Interfaith, Cross-Cultural and Transnational Networks, 1860-1950* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), Chapter 1, pp. 13-35.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-52748-2_2
- R6. Clare Midgley, 'Indian feminist Pandita Ramabai and Liberal Religious Networks in the Nineteenth-Century World' in Clare Midgley, Alison Twells and Julie Carlier, eds, *Transnational History: Connecting the Local and the Global* (Routledge, published May 2016), Chapter 1, pp 13-32. <https://www.routledge.com/Women-in-Transnational-History-Connecting-the-Local-and-the-Global/Midgley-Twells-Carlier/p/book/9781138905788>

All publications and articles were rigorously peer-reviewed prior to publication. R1 and R2 can be made available on request.

4. Details of the impact

Restoring a historical hub of dissenting worship and radical debate

In October 2016, Newington Green Unitarian Church, the oldest non-conformist meeting house in London still in use, was added to [English Heritage's 'At Risk' Register](#). Midgley's research expertise in the intersecting histories of women's anti-slavery activism, the emergence of feminism, and the role of Unitarians in the radical transnational networks of religious dissent and radical social reform was crucial in securing a successful bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund. The award of GBP1,730,000 in Autumn 2018 funded a major restoration, which was completed in June 2020. As a result, the Church was removed from Historic England's 'at risk' list in October 2020 (E2). The HLF funding, which Midgley was instrumental in winning, also provided 5 new paid employment opportunities, with a projected involvement of 170 volunteers from the local community.

The Church was founded in 1708 and graces one side of Newington Green, at the heart of a diverse inner-city community in London and it is today a unique 'non-religious church' with over 100 members. In the late eighteenth century, it was the meeting place for internationally renowned political radicals and religious dissenters, including Mary Wollstonecraft, author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Over the past decade it has flourished, but its survival was threatened by the decay of the building. Midgley's research (R1-R5) enabled the Church to frame an ambitious application to the Heritage Grants Open Programme focused on creating a living centre for exploring 'the dissenting legacy at the birthplace of feminism'. Midgley demonstrated how this might be achieved through a public colloquium at the Church in September 2017, 'Paths to Freedom' (R1-R3). This event initiated the Church's partnership with Benjamin Franklin House, highlighted the building's links with slavery and abolition, connected historians with contemporary activists, and attracted very positive feedback from the 34 attendees (E3). Following the success of the HLF bid, the Chair of the Church Committee acknowledged: 'Your knowledge of the historical context for our community was invaluable in helping us shape the narrative for our bid'. Referring to projected on-site and online public engagement numbers over a 3.5 year period, he stated that 'as a result of your knowledge and experience, we have secured a grant that will allow around 70,000 people to engage with the Meeting House and its heritage' (E1).

Bringing a dissenting heritage alive at the 'birthplace of feminism'

In 2020 a new centre was launched at the restored Church, linking the building's radical legacy with contemporary dissenting thought and activism. Midgley co-produced 7 large historical interpretation boards and an audio guide (R1-R5). These enabled a wide range of visitors to engage with the Church's legacy as an internationally significant hub of dissent, and the 'birthplace of feminism'. As the Community and Learning Manager noted: 'there was a real value in [your insights into] the wider historical context ... which our specific history fits into ... [and the] suggestions to make text more accessible and engaging with audiences' (E4).

Midgley also provided in-person and recorded historical training to local volunteer building tour guides. As the Volunteer Manager acknowledged: 'Through Clare's brilliant take she is contextualising the history of NGMH for our new volunteers (usually non-congregants). This has resulted in volunteers having had an enriching insight to the history as well as links between local residents, historical figures and the building right up to today' (E5). Tours began in September 2020 (20 visitors weekly) but have been highly constrained by pandemic restrictions. Most heritage

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project activities are currently conducted online, through the project website, which includes a blog by Midgley on local activist Sophia Dobson Collett (108 views) (R5) (E5).

Until recently, the public memorialisation of key women in Britain has been limited. Midgley's research instigated a successful grass roots campaign to erect the first ever public memorial to Mary Wollstonecraft, founding mother of modern feminism (R1). The renowned artist, Maggi Hambling CBE, was commissioned to create a sculptural memorial to Wollstonecraft, which was unveiled on 10 November 2020 on Newington Green opposite the newly-restored Church. The memorial has already generated a great deal of public interest and controversy in the press (E6). In April 2014, Midgley co-organised a 'Women Inspire Change' all-day event in honour of Mary Wollstonecraft at the Church, and presented her research on the British and Indian founders of modern feminism (R1, R6). This event, attended by c. 60 people, enhanced public understanding of Mary Wollstonecraft and the foundations of modern feminism internationally, and advanced fund-raising for the 'Mary on the Green' project, which eventually raised GBP143,000 to fund the memorial.

Contributing to a more inclusive public representation of Britain's cultural heritage

Public bodies and cultural institutions increasingly endeavour to make Britain's heritage and culture more inclusive to previously under-representative groups, including women and people of BAME backgrounds. Midgley's underpinning research and collaborations with Historic England and the RSC have broadened and deepened public knowledge and understanding of the history of both black and white women's roles in the abolition of slavery (R1-R3).

A set of three podcasts, *Women and Slavery*, (E7) were recorded for the Historic England website. Initially posted in 2015, they were then further developed by Midgley's research, and have attracted 1,254 listeners. The Diversity Policy Adviser at Historic England capitalised on the posting of the podcasts on the International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition to publicise its inclusion initiatives through a long article incorporating an interview with Midgley in the Independent on Sunday (23 August 2015) (4,000 shares online). This was taken up by the Royal Gazette newspaper in Bermuda, who published a follow-up article highlighting the role of Bermudan-born black abolitionist Mary Prince, quoting from the interview (26 August 2015) (E7).

Midgley was invited to write an 800-word essay on women abolitionists for the programme notes for *The Whip*, a play at the RSC on the abolition of slavery in Britain, written by a leading black female playwright (E8). The play attracted excellent reviews. It sold 9,187 tickets in February and March 2020, along with 1,893 programmes, reaching an estimated 3,800 readers (E8). The play's run was suspended by the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, in October 2020, the RSC aired a live audio version, which was subsequently posted on YouTube in December 2020. It has already been viewed more than 3300 times. The RSC's Programme Editor commented: '*Fantastic – I love it, it's exactly what we wanted*' and expressed her appreciation that the notes 'link closely with the content and characters of the play by conveying to audiences the results of your research into the involvement of black and working class women, women's role in pushing anti-slavery policy in a more radical direction, and the links between anti-slavery activism and the emergence of the women's suffrage movement'. As a result 'The playwright herself is very pleased with the way the content of your notes complements the text of the play' (E8).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- E1. Newington Green Unitarian Church Heritage Lottery Fund award – successful bid and correspondence acknowledging Midgley's contribution

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- E2. Newington Green Meeting House – images of restored building and evidence removal from Historic England’s ‘at risk’ list including media coverage, eg. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/oct/15/historic-england-takes-london-birthplace-of-feminism-off-at-risk-list>
- E3. 'Paths to Freedom' event - programme and reviews
- E4. Email and visitor numbers from Community and Learning Manager, NGMH project
- E5. Newington Green Meeting House – email from NGMH Community and Learning Manager
- E6. New memorial to Mary Wollstonecraft – media coverage
- E7. Historic England podcast – podcast series <https://soundcloud.com/historicengland/02-radicalism-and-resistance?in=historicengland/sets/women-and-slavery> and press coverage
- E8. *The Whip*, RSC – programme notes, correspondence, audience and sales figures