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Woman have no voice in Parliament. They make no laws, they consent to none, they abrogate none.

(The Lawes Resolutions of Women’s Rights, c.1632)

[Women are] too liable to be seduced from their attention to the public weal, by the smooth and silken pursuits who constantly invest a court, to rule a state.

(London Debating Society, March 1790)

The fear I have is, lest we should invite her to trespass upon the delicacy, the purity, the refinement, the elevation of her own nature, which are the present sources of its power.

(Rt Hon William Gladstone MP to Samuel Smith, MP, 1892)

I do not think this House is a fit and proper place for any respectable woman to sit in.

(Admiral of the Fleet Sir Hedworth Meux MP, 23 October 1918)

These four quotations from four different centuries are each concerned with the relationship between women and parliament, the epicentre of political power in the British state. All respond to direct or indirect suggestions that women might participate in the political life of the nation by voting for and serving in Parliament by suggesting that such activity is in some way unsuited to them. The Lawes Resolutions of Women’s Rights was a legal textbook published some time after the reign of Elizabeth I had provoked discussions about how much political power women could exercise. The second quotation emerged from an eighteenth-century public debating society as members considered whether women might vote or sit in a democratised parliament. Gladstone’s response to Samuel Smith reflected a growing interest in the question of women’s suffrage in the late nineteenth century, and Sir Hedworth Meux was voicing his opposition to the bill that would allow women to become MPs in the early
women’s place in national politics has been a recurrent theme in British history, both within Parliament and beyond it in the realm of print and debate, where public opinion is formed. Discussions of women’s relationship to politics are as old as discussions of politics itself.

Yet, despite ample evidence for earlier precedents, much of the historiography of women in British politics has taken a shorter timeframe. A popular starting point is 1867, when Parliament received its first collective petition for women’s suffrage. A few studies go further back to the end of the eighteenth century, with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, which is positioned as the precedent for later activities. Most accounts end in 1918, when the Representation of the People Act gave votes to some British women (although some studies continue up to the arrival of equal suffrage in 1928). In other words, for the most part, the story of women and politics in Britain is presented in terms of the history of the nineteenth-century women’s movement, and more particularly the history of the campaign for the vote, offering no space for describing women’s relationship to politics in an earlier (or indeed a later) period.

This focus on suffrage has encouraged over-reliance on what Amanda Vickery termed ‘the heroic voice’ within the history of women’s politics. The heroic version suggests that there is no history of women and politics before suffrage. It describes a linear progression whereby suffrage agitation grew from small beginnings into a mass political movement, the ‘women’s movement’, which ended in triumph in 1918 (or 1928). Participants in the suffrage campaign had written its history in similarly Whiggish terms even as it was unfolding. Bertha Mason’s *Story of the Women’s Suffrage Movement* (1912), for example, moved readers through nineteenth-century developments in chapters with titles such as ‘Light of Dawn’, using the metaphor of a ship to argue that the movement had all it required to ‘carry it to victory’. This version is attractive to feminist historians, not least because it describes women’s presence in an arena which non-feminist political historians would recognise. Political history, despite the growth of history ‘from below’, still inclines towards high politics, diplomacy and affairs of state. So although women’s history shared social history’s concern with telling the hidden stories of the powerless, these were not easily integrated into existing grand narratives of state formation. Studying women in British politics from the beginnings of the suffrage movement up to the point at which there was a woman prime minister was one way of disrupting a male consensus; it positioned the historical subject ‘woman’ on the winning side and made her more difficult to ignore.

Focusing on successes has inherent problems, however. Verta Taylor and Leila Rupp’s research on 1950s American feminism alerted them to the perils of failing to study women’s political activity in those periods when the women’s movement appeared to be in abeyance. They explained that while ‘the metaphor of “waves” of the women’s movement … features the cresting waves but ignores the troughs between’, considering the concept of abeyance could show women deploying ‘a variety of strategies to nurture and sustain an opposition collective identity’. This echoes the findings of Dale Spender in the early
1980s. Spender interviewed a number of women who had been active in first-wave feminism, intent on discovering what they did politically between the vote and the emergence of second-wave feminism in the 1960s, when there was ‘no women’s movement in Britain’. The furious response of one interviewee, that ‘there’s always been a women’s movement this century’, gave Spender the title for her book but did not alter the fact that the historiography of women’s politics still tended to stop in 1928 and recommence in the late 1960s.4

Turning our attention to the ‘troughs’ or abeyances that lie between periods of marked activity has expanded how we view the scope and extent of women’s politics. Studies of inter-war feminism by scholars such as Johanna Alberti and Cheryl Law, as well as recent graduate theses by Jessica Thurlow and Samantha Clements, have challenged the suggestion that political activity by women ceased at this time.5 However, they are not always immune from the tendency to present women’s politics in terms of a linear progression. Spender was alert to the danger of minimising women’s history through accepting the twentieth century as ‘a period of unparalleled progress’; nevertheless her presentation of the lives of an earlier generation of activists fits them into this narrative rather than questioning why women’s politics were less visible at a national level at certain times.6 Such work also accepts the established chronology of women’s involvement in politics, with research on inter-war feminism situating it between the nineteenth and twentieth-century ‘waves’. Recent recognition of a ‘third wave’ of British feminism does not change this. Meanwhile, women’s politics in the early nineteenth century, the mid-eighteenth century or earlier are set aside from the linear version of women’s political history. They are not seen as part of a ‘trough’ as they stand outside the timeframe bounded by feminism’s waves; consequently they are often afforded less consideration.

This book attempts to move the study of women’s politics beyond the chronology implied by the wave metaphor by demonstrating that women were active political agents long before the campaign for the vote began. It offers some suggestions as to the processes of change which brought women to the point at which something resembling a ‘women’s movement’ might be possible, and considers how the existence of this movement impacted on women’s politics in turn. To do this is to do more than to offer a series of earlier precedents from which women’s increased political involvement might be dated. Taking a longer view uncovers a narrative which is much patchier than studies concentrating on later periods might suggest. Women were active throughout the period of this study, but not continuously. The precedent of their political activity in one decade or century did not reduce opposition to it in later years. Periods that saw comparatively high levels of political participation by women were often followed by phases of backlash in which their presence was considered exceptional and rejected. From Leveller petitioners to Chartists, from Anti-Corn Law Leaguers to suffragettes, and from Primrose League Dames to Reclaim the Night marchers, each generation of politically active women has had to justify its presence afresh in what was and arguably still is seen as a male space.

This is not to say that women consistently forget their own histories. There are many examples of women invoking historical precedent as part of their justification for political activity. Suffragettes referred back to the Chartists, and the
Women’s Liberation Movement deliberately evoked both militant and constitutional suffrage at different times. What it does do is refute the suggestion that each instance of political activity by women expands their involvement up to the point at which it becomes seen as natural or unproblematic. Placed within a longer timeframe, the heroic narrative of forward progress is thus replaced by a much less confident but more nuanced picture of multiple progressions and successes interspersed with periods of stagnation, defeat and even regression.

**Defining the political**

Writing about women and politics challenges the way in which politics is conceived. The equation of ‘political’ with parliamentary-focused activity and activism has been revised by social and cultural historians alongside historians of women and gender whose research has called for a broader definition for political actions. For the early modern period, Hilda Smith has argued that studying women’s politics requires a ‘broader and more inclusive understanding of politics than we possess today. They considered local office holding, political obligations of families among the governing class, as well as voting and political rights, as constituting politics, while we would be more apt to equate the term only with the latter.’7 The idea that women of a certain class were expected to participate in the political obligations of their family informed the activities of aristocratic women in seventeenth-century royal courts (as it had done in earlier periods). In the eighteenth century, upper-class women took part in electoral politics on behalf of their husbands, fathers or brothers, and undertook considerable political activity in their own homes through facilitating networking opportunities for ambitious party men. Familial obligations persisted beyond the early modern period. Kim Reynolds’ study of the role of aristocratic women in the Victorian age showed how they continued to play an important part in maintaining ‘a distinctive cohesive political culture’ at local and national level.8 Even in the twentieth century, familial obligation did not vanish completely; the phenomenon of ‘male equivalence’ through which some of the first women MPs succeeded to seats vacated by their husbands carried overtones of this.

Smith’s further point about the importance of local office holding is equally valid beyond the early modern era. The local has always been an important site for women’s politics for a variety of reasons. A strong community dimension has facilitated women’s involvement in a number of campaigns over the centuries, including seventeenth and eighteenth-century food riots, Chartism, First World War rent strikes, opposition to the 1930s means test and the Women’s Liberation Movement’s fight for refuges for victims of domestic violence. Even where there was no obvious community function, women would often be more active in local branches of political organisations than at the national level. Local activity fitted well around the competing demands of home, work and family. It was also easier to get involved; as political organisations expanded, national activity became more bureaucratic and membership of national committees was often drawn from a small pool of previously elected regional delegates. Local organisation was less rigid, with all members eligible for office. Although local political studies have tended to concentrate on the grass-roots
activities of radical groups, local politics were not necessarily oppositional. As local government expanded in the nineteenth century, women participated in its growth, often justifying their presence through emphasising its connection with domestic or private life. Local government politicised areas of life previously seen as both nonpolitical and feminine, including educating and feeding children, caring for the sick and the elderly, and improving the environment immediately around the home. And if numbers are any guide, local government remains a more welcoming arena for women’s politics up to the present day; in 2008 almost 30 per cent of the United Kingdom’s councillors were women as opposed to just over 19 per cent of MPs.9

Defining what the political means for women broadens understandings of the term in other ways. It was not until the twentieth century that British women became full members of all political parties. This did not mean that they were not involved in party politics before; by the end of the nineteenth century the Liberal and Conservative Parties each had large female auxiliary organisations, while socialist parties always admitted women to membership on equal terms with men. It did, however, mean that much of women’s politics took place outside of the main party structures, sometimes in quite unexpected places such as the sewing meetings in which nineteenth-century socialist women gave their working-class membership space for lively political discussion without drawing them away from their domestic labours more than they would wish. Women could act politically in organisations that were not attached to parties; Catriona Beaumont has pointed to the Women’s Institutes and Townswomen’s Guilds as places where women’s broader political concerns were addressed in the inter-war period.10 Before the party era, women’s politics could be equally diverse; Bernard Capp has shown how women’s ‘informal networks [and] gossip’ were essential in enabling ‘the politics of the parish’ to function in the early modern period.11

We should be careful not to construe every instance of collective public activity by women as political. Although there are ways in which their actions can be read this way, it would be difficult to argue that the large numbers of young women who joined girls’ clubs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were being political in the same way as their contemporaries who opted for the suffragette movement. Yet it remains important to recognise that including women’s politics in political history widens its scope, and involves looking beyond the world of party and Parliament as well as within it.

Finally, some words about the organisation of this book. Its intention is to cover women’s participation in politics within the three nations of England, Scotland and Wales in such a way as to produce a collective version of the history of women in British politics. Achieving a reasonable balance between the national historiographical fields as they currently stand is no easy task. It is no longer sufficient, as Kirsti Bohata remarked, ‘to insert a Welsh narrative into existing histories of English feminism’, a point which also holds true for Scottish examples.12 National histories require developing in their own specific context. Yet in the case of studies of women’s political participation, there has been little attempt to do this. Beyond the important collections edited by Angela John and Jane Aron, and Deidre Beddoe’s outline of the twentieth century, little research exists on Welsh women and politics; the early modern period, for example, lacks
any comprehensive survey. Scotland has received more attention, although as Lynn Abrams observed, ‘despite more than two decades of research into Scottish women’s history … there is still a battle to be fought’ in terms of its incorporation.

The approach taken here has been to attempt a balance in terms of examples, and to suggest instances where the Welsh and Scottish experience differed, but the work ultimately reflects the current state of the historiography of women and British politics, which remains predominantly English. The significant body of work that has been produced in the wake of devolution has much more to say about women and politics, although it lies beyond the chronological scope of this work. This has included attempts to place recent developments within a historical context, suggesting avenues for further research which open the possibility that a more inclusive historiography of women and British politics in the late twentieth century will be achievable.

In any textbook a degree of selectivity is required, and a study that attempts to compress 300 years of women’s political activity into nine chapters is no exception. The approach is both thematic and chronological, intended to offer sufficient detail on key organisations whilst at the same time avoiding too much repetition of the external events that provoked or impacted on them. The book is divided into three sections which describe women’s experiences of politics in three periods, before, during and after the nineteenth-century women’s movement. The first two chapters outline women’s political activity across a variety of locations and organisations from the Glorious Revolution to the mid-nineteenth century. The second section comprises four chapters which consider a more distinct ‘women’s movement’ in relation to suffrage and to organised political parties. The three chapters in the final section look at the impact of women’s political citizenship in Parliament, in established and emerging political parties and in a broader women’s movement from 1918 to 1979.

The subject matter of the chapters reflects the current focus of research into women and politics in each of these periods. The chapter on women MPs, for example, is mainly concerned with the period up to 1945. This is not to suggest that there were no women MPs after this time, or that their work was insignificant. However, the limited literature that exists on this topic between 1945 and 1979 repeats many themes covered in studies of earlier periods. Meanwhile the final chapter on women’s non-party political organisations after 1928 considers the Equal Pay Act and thus returns to the question of women in Parliament. Selectivity has also required hard choices about the amount of detail to include on individual organisations, and the result is bound to disappoint on some levels as familiar groups are omitted or skirted over. There is, however, much on organisations about which little has been said before, and I hope that this will go some way towards compensating the reader.
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