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Freethought and Free Love? Marriage, birth control and sexual morality

Questions of sex were central to Secularism. Even those Freethinkers who desperately sought respectability for the movement found it impossible to avoid the subject, for irreligion was irrevocably linked in the public mind with sexual license. Moreover, the Freethought movement had, since the beginning of the nineteenth century, been home to some of the leading advocates of sexual liberty, birth control and marriage reform. A complex relationship existed between these strands of sexual dissidence – sometimes conflicting, at other times coming together to form a radical, feminist vision of sexual freedom. If a 'Freethinking' vision of sexual freedom existed, it certainly did not go uncontested by others in the movement. Nevertheless, the intellectual and political location of organised Freethought made it fertile ground for a radical re-imagining of sexual norms and conduct.

The Freethought renunciation of Christianity necessarily entailed a rejection of the moral authority of the Church, particularly its role in legitimising sexual relations. Secularists were therefore required to find a new basis for morality, and questions of sex were at the centre of this project to establish new ethical criteria. In some cases Secularists' rejection of Christian asceticism and their emphasis on the material world could also lead to a positive attitude to physical passions in both men and women. The central Freethinking principle of free enquiry necessitated a commitment to open discussion of sexual matters, and while this often generated a great deal of anxiety, the majority of the movement's leadership supported the need for free discussion.

The furore surrounding George Drysdale's publication of *Elements of Social Science* in 1854, provides one way into understanding the complex dynamics of Secularist debates on sex. This book, anonymously authored by the Freethinker George Drysdale, proved enormously influential in Victorian debates on prostitution, female sexuality, marriage and birth

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control.[1] The distinctively anti-religious arguments put forward by Drysdale in favour of promiscuous sexual relationships, 'preventative checks' (birth control) and female emancipation, reveal the importance of Freethought ideology in developing libertarian thinking on sex during this period. Yet the reaction of the wider Freethought movement to *Elements of Social Science* was mixed to say the least; it provoked considerable opposition in some quarters and led Secularists to discuss questions of sex with renewed intensity. *Elements* raised two issues in particular that were already of great importance to the Freethought movement – a critique of the institution of marriage and Neo-Malthusian support for birth control.

Freethinking feminist attacks on marriage stretched back to the early decades of the nineteenth century, when Richard Carlile published *What is Love?* (1826) and formed a moral union with Eliza Sharples in 1832. In the 1830s and 1840s this critique was further developed by the Owenites, who saw the eradication of Christian marriage and traditional familial structures as a pre-condition of female emancipation. This more radical opposition to patriarchal family institutions is usually believed to have disappeared from feminist circles after the collapse of the Owenite movement, after which the mainstream women's rights movement favoured a more moderate and respectable campaign for marriage reform. It is argued here, however, that in continuing to provide a forum in which less conventional ideas about relations between men and women could be discussed, the Freethought movement kept alive the Owenites' more radical feminist vision.

Freethought support for birth control began in the 1820s, and was brought to public attention in 1877 when Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh were tried for the publication of Charles Knowlton's birth control pamphlet, *Fruits of Philosophy*. Their highly publicised trial saw the re-emergence of many of the same tensions and arguments in the Secularist movement that had arisen over the publication of Drysdale's *Elements*. The relationship between Neo-Malthusianism and feminism was not a straightforward one, and it was their support for birth control that most clearly divided Freethinking feminists from the rest of the women's rights movement. When, in the 1880s and 1890s the possibility of greater sexual freedom outside conventional marriage began to be discussed more openly in the wider women's movement, this more radical discourse drew heavily on older Freethinking arguments.

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The Bible of the Secularists? George Drysdale's *Elements of Social Science*

In 1862 Harriet Law lectured at Brighouse, where she debated with the Rev. J. Clarke on the properties of matter. Towards the end of the debate, Clarke claimed that Secularism had no true basis for morality and that, without the Christian system of future rewards and punishments, there was nothing to prevent him from murdering his wife and children in the pursuit of self-interest. Harriet Law replied that Secularism was in fact more moral than Christianity, that it believed in the inherently 'noble qualities' of mankind, and that the Bible itself was full of the most immoral vices. Clarke, evidently put out by the quick-wittedness of his female opponent, then 'endeavoured to ruin the character of Mrs Law, to ruin her reputation, and insinuated that her mission was for accomplishing the most immoral purposes'.

> He read aloud in the coarsest manner, nearly all the most exciting passages contained in Mr Barker's *Review* of the *Elements of Social Science*, and, like him, dwelt with peculiar gusto on those parts which tickle the fancy of sensual natures … he not only did this but said that the book was written by one of Mrs Law's party, and that she was going about the country pretending to lecture on 'The Degradation of Women, caused by Religion and Ignorance', but her real object was to indoctrinate her sex with the principles and the practices of the *Elements of Social Science*.[2]

The arguments put forward by Clarke would have already been familiar to Harriet Law, who keenly followed and contributed to the furore over the publication of the *Elements of Social Science*. In fact, her encounter with the irate Rev J. Clarke followed a familiar pattern: a debate on materialism closely followed by a discussion of whether Secularism was capable of supporting a system of morality independent from Christianity; the elision of morality in general with sexual morality in particular; the association of Secularism with the arguments put forward in the *Elements*; and the assumption that Freethinking feminism was a by-word for an extreme form of sexual libertarianism. Harriet Law's response, to which I will return, forcibly challenged such assumptions. Yet these same themes emerged again and again in the scandal surrounding the *Elements of Social Science*.

Physical, Sexual and Natural Religion (re-named *Elements of Social Science* in subsequent editions) was first published in 1854 by 'a student of medicine'. Its original title aptly indicated the connection between the author's Freethinking beliefs and his rejection of conventional

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sexual morality. George Drysdale was a Freethinking doctor from an upper-class family who later went on to write regularly for *The National Reformer* under the initials G. R., though his authorship of *Elements* was not revealed until after his death.[3] *Elements* opened with an attack on how the Christian religion elevated the 'spiritual' side of human nature to the detriment of the 'physical', so that 'the sexual appetites and enjoyments' were denigrated and repressed. The Christian Church, complained Drysdale, regarded it as 'a great merit to crucify the bodily lusts'. Instead, he espoused a new kind of 'physical religion' which looked to 'animal' nature as its guide. Physical religion would abolish Christian asceticism, doing away with 'all flimsy veils of morbid modesty, shame, and indolence ….'[4] Sexual desire, Drysdale argued, should be gratified without shame and regular exercise of the sexual organs was essential to good health. (He listed and described the variety of diseases in both men and women that were, he believed, caused by lack of sexual activity.)

Drysdale's favouring of the physical world over the spiritual was clearly part of his Freethinking worldview. He believed that the nineteenth century was witness to 'the greatest revolution which has ever taken place, or which perhaps ever will take place, in human Belief. This great change is the progress from a Supernatural to a Natural Religion.' The Secularists were identified as the true bearers of this Natural or Physical Religion, which held that all states of mind as well as states of the body were determined by physical laws. Morality itself was a 'science' and should be governed by the laws of nature.[5] Thus Drysdale's Freethought led him to argue for a complete overhaul of conventional sexual morality, since under the current system – in which marriage to a single person was for life, sexual intercourse outside marriage was forbidden, and sex was likely to lead to pregnancy – it was impossible fully to exercise one's sexual desires in conformity with the laws of nature. Instead, men visited prostitutes while women wasted away from 'green sickness' and other ailments caused by enforced celibacy. Again, 'the authority of supernatural religion' was blamed for this repressive system, which had 'been inseparably interwoven with the Christian and Hebraic beliefs'. For, as Drysdale wrote, 'there is scarcely anything on which so much stress is laid in the Old and New Testament as the institution of marriage'.[6] By contrast, Drysdale believed that men and women should be able to have sexual relationships free from both the sanction of marriage and the disapproval of society, claiming that, 'If a man and a woman conceive a passion for each other, they should be morally entitled to indulge it.' In the early years of one's life, from puberty onwards, promiscuous sexual experimentation should be permitted and boys and girls taught

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to enjoy one another's company. Later on, one might form longer-lasting attachments, but it should not be assumed, as the Christian institution of marriage did, that love was 'constant and unvarying', and Drysdale believed that couples should remain with one another only as long as their love and sexual desire lasted. Drysdale stressed that in envisaging this new system of sexual relations, he was not merely advocating easier divorce, but '*a far more radical change* … before love can be rendered sufficiently attainable by all human beings …'.[7] Unwanted pregnancy – the obvious obstacle to the free indulgence of sexual desire – would be overcome by the use of 'preventative checks' (birth control).[8]

Drysdale's 'physical, sexual and natural religion' was not an amoral libertinism; instead *Elements* articulated a moral code founded upon longstanding Freethinking principles. A commitment to the democratic dissemination of knowledge led Drysdale to provide a detailed and frank description of the sexual organs, reproduction, and venereal disease. For he believed that, especially in women, religiously inspired notions of 'innocence', 'purity' and 'delicacy' had prevented people from protecting themselves against disease. [9] Drysdale's attack on the current system of marriage was also motivated by his commitment to women's emancipation: marriage not only kept women legally and financially dependent upon men but also embodied a sexual double standard that prohibited women from fulfilling their sexual desire (which he insisted was as strong as that of men).[10] A more open practice of sexual relations, he maintained, would be more moral than the present one, for it would put an end to the 'licentiousness' and 'deception' that currently afflicted modern marriages, replacing it with 'happiness', 'virtue' and 'moderation'. Prostitution would no longer be necessary and friendship would develop more easily between men and women, once the compulsory element had been removed from their relationships.[11] Birth control was to be lauded because it 'put the two sexes almost on a par in sexual freedom', allowing a woman 'to indulge her sexual desires, with the same exemption from the after consequences as man …'.[12] Drysdale's advocacy of 'preventative intercourse' also arose from his endorsement of Malthusian economics, which identified over-population, particularly overly-large families among the working class, as the cause of poverty. Large sections of *Elements of Social Science* were devoted to an exposition of the Malthusian theory of over-population and the decimating effects of poverty upon the working class. Drysdale fervently hoped that the birth control techniques he recommended in the book would ultimately put an end to such misery, and he dedicated *Elements* to 'the Poor and the Suffering'.[13]

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Elements of Social Science was therefore very much a product of nineteenth-century Freethought, and the success of the work depended largely on the Secularist press and publishing industry. Publishers had shied away from the manuscript until the Freethinking Edward Truelove took it on, and the book received its first favourable reviews in the Secularist press, which advertised it thereafter. When Truelove died in 1898 George Standring, another Secularist, took over its publication.[14] However, in spite of the fact that Drysdale presented *Elements* as a Secularist work, the publication of his book had an explosive and extremely divisive effect on the movement. Drysdale's views on sexual morality were not only deeply shocking by Christian standards, but the explicitness with which they were expressed also exceeded anything previously written on the subject in Freethinking circles. Moreover, *Elements* was published just at the point when George Jacob Holyoake was attempting to present Secularism as a respectable movement, renouncing the title of 'infidelism' and its dangerous connotations of sexual immorality that had done so much to tarnish the reputation of Owenite Freethinking feminism.[15] Many Freethought leaders were shocked by the explicit tone and content of *Elements* while at the same time recognising the sincerity of its author's intentions. They thus found themselves torn between their commitment to freedom of discussion and their desire for a newly forged respectability. The *Investigator* gave a favourable review, but emphasised the courage it took to mention such a work in print, claiming that it was only their Secularist beliefs that compelled them to take this risk.[16] George Jacob Holyoake also had reservations, particularly regarding the original title *Physical, Natural and Sexual Religion*, for he feared that the term 'sexual' might confuse it with pornography and that the reference to 'religion' wrongly mixed up 'theology' with 'physiology'. Nevertheless, Holyoake concluded that *Elements* served a valuable purpose in providing the poor with information which was usually only available in 'high, expensive … volumes' and that the real crime lay with those who refused discussion of birth control, for this 'was a prudery as criminal as vice itself'.[17]

Freethinkers agonised over their endorsement of Drysdale's *Elements*, not because they lacked courage or were only half-heartedly committed to freedom of discussion, but because they were dealing with a question that was of central importance to the future of the Secularist project. How the movement approached questions of sex was fundamental to their wider mission to prove that morality could exist independently from religion. In the same year that *Elements* was published, Holyoake sought to explain the significance of the title he had chosen for his new movement.

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'Freethought', he wrote, denoted '*how* we think', while 'Secularism' was the result and the object of such freethinking, a positive embodiment of the 'truths' of humanity and progress revealed by freedom of thought. 'Our object [as Secularists] is to promote personal morality.' Secularists rejected Christian morality because they believed that it endorsed vice: 'It sees wives beaten, but puts forth no hand to divorce poor women from brutes.' In declaring that, 'By Secularism we do not mean sensualism, nor do we mean prudery' Holyoake was therefore attempting to tread a very fine line, to carve out an alternative path for Freethought which allowed it to be just as morally upstanding as Christianity.[18]

In the debates over the publication of *Elements* Holyoake continued to steer this careful path. On the one hand, he gave *Elements* a relatively favourable review and agreed to advertise it (under a different title). At the same time he published in *The Reasoner* a series of articles by Francis Newman which took the moral hard-line on questions of sexual morality and implicitly condemned Drysdale's book, without mentioning it by name. Newman identified the emergence of a group of young and confident Freethinkers 'who feel their own power to refute as errors and mere prejudices many things counted as sacred in the past, and still dogmatically upheld by the churches ….' But he cautioned against the exhilaration felt by those who had thrown off the tutelage of religious authority, on the grounds that it could lead to foolhardiness in matters of morality. Newman went on to strongly defend celibacy for the unmarried and, in a thinly veiled reference to *Elements*, accused anyone who questioned its importance of seeking to 'corrupt (if he can) our wives and sisters'.[19] In a later article he called upon working men to wreak 'vengeance' on all those who preached a doctrine of Free Love and who sought to persuade women that 'seduction' would cause them no harm.[20] Following this series of articles, Holyoake published an editorial distancing himself from the harsh moralistic tone of some of Newman's writings, while at the same time celebrating the fact that since their publication no one could be in any doubt as to the respectable 'moral temper' of Freethought.[21] Holyoake thus hoped that the newly founded Secularism had succeeded in riding out the potentially detrimental impact of Drysdale's work without betraying any of its fundamental principles.

Yet in 1861 organised Freethought was again to be divided over the *Elements of Social Science*. Charles Bradlaugh had praised Drysdale's book from its early days (his advocacy gaining it the title 'Bible of the Secularists') and he published a sympathetic review in *The National Reformer* in 1860.[22] Joseph Barker, who at this time co-edited *The National Reformer* with Bradlaugh, strongly opposed the book, and

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when Bradlaugh proposed the founding of a Malthusian League in 1861, Barker left in protest and set up the rival General Secular Reformers Society.[23] In his new journal, *Barker's Review*, he condemned Bradlaugh's 'Unbounded License Party' and re-published Francis Newman's series of articles from *The Reasoner*.[24] Barker also delivered a number of public lectures entitled 'The TWO CLASSES OF FREETHINKERS, their different views and aims with regard to *Morals*' in which he defended 'the Bible or the Hebrew notions of chastity'.[25] In spite of the fact that Drysdale's work had drawn on many of the principles and intellectual traditions that clustered around organised Freethought, the revulsion which both Newman and Barker felt for *Elements* suggests that there was by no means a straightforward correlation between Freethought and a libertarian approach to sexual morality. As the previous chapter demonstrated, the militant moralism that fuelled Newman and Barker's outrage was as characteristic of the Secularist viewpoint during this period as Drysdale's belief in the need to disseminate knowledge among the masses.[26] The debates that took place in *The Reasoner* in 1855 and in *Barker's Review* in 1861 reveal a wide spectrum of attitudes among Freethinkers.[27] Sophia Dobson Collet wrote to say that she wished the Secularist leaders would publicly distance themselves from 'the bad men of your own party' – presumably Drysdale – though she also criticised Newman for the unforgiving tone of his moralism.[28] Holyoake claimed that nine-tenths of those who responded to Newman's articles were in favour of them, although the selection of published correspondence also contained letters complaining that Newman had not properly considered the harmful effects of the current marriage laws and from one person who proudly declared all 'fidelity' to be '*immoral*' and '*unnatural*'.[29] Joseph Barker also printed numerous letters praising him for 'exposing' the *Elements of Social Science* and thus saving the correspondents from the terrible fate of accidentally reading it![30]

Some historians have laid great emphasis on how a mid-century turn to respectability produced far more conservative thinking on sexual morality among Freethinkers.[31] Michael Mason, especially, argued that Secularism was central to pushing what he called an 'anti-sensualist' agenda in Victorian debates on sexuality which promoted self-control or 'repression' rather than sexual liberation. While Mason rightly identified a strong current of anti-libertarian attitudes to sexuality within the Secularist movement, I want here to challenge his assumption that the intellectual culture of Freethought as a whole can be characterised simply as 'anti-sensualist', a category which is itself problematic in attempting to understand debates on sexuality during this period. Mason did not

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explain why, if Secularist ideology was the main bearer of anti-sensualist opposition to libertarian and libertine visions of sexuality, the very people that he identified as pushing for a more positive attitude to sexual liberation – Richard Carlile, George Drysdale, Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant – were also Freethinkers and Secularists.[32] There were a number of aspects of Secularist ideology easily lent to arguing for a libertarian break with traditional sexual morality, and it is therefore necessary to understand the many disagreements that arose regarding Freethought and Free Love also in relation to the Secularist movement's feminism.[33]

Harriet Law, militant atheist, feminist and socialist, was also a vocal opponent of George Drysdale's *Elements of Social Science*. When the Rev. J. Clarke attempted to smear her as an immoral proponent of the work, she claimed to be deeply insulted. In fact, Harriet Law had already publicly 'repudiated' the book in a previous issue of *The National Reformer*, and she declared herself to have nothing to do with 'that party' (presumably Bradlaugh's faction) which had endorsed it.[34] So why did Harriet Law, positioned on the left of the Secularist movement, oppose Drysdale's libertarian and ostensibly feminist work? Part of the answer can be found in the report of her encounter with Clarke in *The National Reformer*, which noted that, in spite of Law's protestations and public condemnation of *Elements*, 'The tales that have been afloat since Mr. Clarke's dastardly attack on Mrs Law's character and mission are too sickening to dwell upon. They are the result of his premeditated intention to ruin her character, and hence destroy her influence.'[35] In pursuing a highly public career as lecturer, denying the truths of the gospels and advocating women's rights, Harriet Law was already guilty of numerous transgressions. This made her particularly vulnerable to accusations of sexual impropriety – accusations which, if they stuck, would not only damage her reputation in the eyes of the Christian public, but might also place her career in jeopardy within the Secularist movement itself. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that she should have sought to distance herself from such a controversial work. In Law's case, the familiar Secularist technique of claiming to be more moral than the Christian was not simply a political defence of the movement but a personal defence of her reputation. Harriet Law compared *Elements* to the Bible and maintained that she would have been equally ashamed to be seen carrying about either of them. *The National Reformer* approvingly reported that, in responding to Clarke, Mrs Law had 'exhibited the superiority of a Secularist's morality over that practised by a Christian.[36] More, therefore, is required than a simplistic recourse to 'anti-sensualism' to explain why otherwise 'progressive' individuals might have been

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hostile to libertarian attacks on conventional sexual morality. Harriet Law's feminism might also have motivated her opposition to Drysdale, and this ongoing tension between feminism and sexual libertarianism was evident in wider Freethought discussions of marriage reform and birth control.

Marriage, divorce and Free Love

George Drysdale's attack on the Christian institution of marriage, and in particular his critique of the way it enslaved women, may have provoked a dramatic response but it in fact drew on a pre-existing Freethought tradition that would have been familiar to his Secularist readership. In previous centuries, unorthodox thinking in religious matters had often gone hand in hand with a rejection of conventional sexual morality. Freethinking libertines, such as the deist Peter Annet (1693–1769), had called for an end to laws in matters of love – championing divorce and proclaiming that 'Passion requires Liberty above all Things'.[37] Richard Carlile drew upon such works for *What is Love?*, while taking a more woman-centred approach. He condemned the 'artificial ties' of Christian marriage, which acted as 'shackles' on 'the simple enjoyment of a passion', while at the same time arguing that woman's right to sexual enjoyment was equal to that of man. Carlile did not advocate promiscuous intercourse, but thought that unions between men and women should be founded on the promise, 'You shall have me to yourself just as long as you treat me well and can really love me; when that feeling ceases, we had better part and seek new matches.'[38] A few years later, Carlile formed a moral union with the Freethinking feminist Eliza Sharples on precisely these lines.

The Owenite attack on 'Marriages of the Priesthood' also drew on these older critiques but fused them with a far more explicit and coherent feminist agenda.[39] Emma Martin's lectures in the 1840s on 'The Rights and Present Condition of Women' and 'Marriage and Divorce' argued that marriage under Christianity and capitalism was all too often a commercial transaction amounting to nothing more than legalised prostitution. She demanded that the present marriage system be abandoned altogether, in favour of love unions, liberal divorce laws for both sexes and communal living arrangements in which all labour, including housework and childcare, would be divided equally between the sexes.[40] Margaret Chappellsmith also lambasted Christian marriage as a gross hypocrisy, and pointed to 'the vast number of brothels and prostitutes' that existed in spite of the lip service paid to the doctrines of 'chastity

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and conjugal fidelity'. Once women were granted economic independence, they would no longer be the victims of this corrupt system. Chappellsmith also maintained that the communal living advocated by the Owenites, 'by its certainty of producing abundant wealth and equal distribution, does away with all restraint upon marriage from pecuniary considerations, and does away with all temptation to form marriages from any other motive other than affection'.[41]

Freethinking Owenite feminists rejected both a repressive Christian morality *and* a libertine interpretation of their demand for a more liberal system of marriage. Emma Martin re-defined 'chastity' as 'equally distant from the erratic flights of passion, as from conventional abstinence'. She asserted that 'celibacy' was not 'natural' and condemned 'the interests of religion' for requiring 'the monitions of nature to be stifled'. Nevertheless, Martin also insisted that 'true love favours monogamy', and that the Owenite definition of 'chastity' was compatible with 'the cultivation of family affections and the discharge of marriage obligations'. Martin rejected the right of religious authorities to sanction or condemn women's sexuality via the means of 'false ceremonies' and argued instead for female sexual autonomy. A woman's chastity 'was of the mind' not dependent upon the 'law' or 'circumstance', so that, for example, a woman who had been raped did not become unchaste. Only the woman herself, as the person with the knowledge as to whether she truly loved her partner, could determine whether she was acting chastely.[42] Margaret Chappellsmith also insisted that 'the unions which would be formed under the new and rational arrangements' would be 'happy and lasting'.[43] However, in spite of attempts by Owenite feminists to present their new vision of sexual relations as both moral and chaste, there was no escaping the fact that they were advocating an extremely radical overhaul of conventional sexual morality. They not only faced fierce attacks from their Christian opponents on this subject, but were also confronted by the fears of working-class women that an end to marriage laws would leave them vulnerable to seduction, exploitation and abandonment.[44]

Freethinking feminists kept this libertarian feminist vision alive in the middle decades of the century. From the 1850s, feminists in the Secularist movement continued to critique Christian marriage institutions and after 1855 this became part of a broader and more sustained campaign for marriage reform organised by the women's rights movement.[45] Many of the arguments put forward by Freethinkers were in tune with those being made within the mainstream feminist movement. Harriet Law lectured throughout the 1860s and 1870s on the subject

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of 'Love, Courtship and Matrimony, greatly misunderstood and why', arguing that men and women should allow friendship to develop before embarking upon marriage, and that if women were better educated unions between the sexes could become equal partnerships.[46] The need for intellectual companionship and equality in marriage was also an important theme of Annie Besant's very first lecture on *The Political Status of Women* in 1874, and of Kate Watts' series of articles on female education which appeared in the *Secular Review* in 1879.[47] There was agreement across the Freethought and women's movements on the need for greater female autonomy and independence in marriage. Sara Hennell insisted that 'The girl adequately brought up must be at once fit to be married, and fit to live profitably alone' and she condemned the idea that a married couple should become 'one' in the eyes of God. 'The kind of love to be hoped for,' she argued, 'has to … [cease] to merge the womanhood of the wife into the character of a mere adjunct to the man's nature'.[48] Such a belief motivated the campaign for the right of married women to hold property, which involved many Freethinking women, including Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, who sat on the Married Women's Property Committee.[49] In 1878 and 1880 Annie Besant and Wolstenholme Elmy were the first women to publicly raise the issue of marital rape, causing an outcry soon responded to by the rest of the women's movement.[50]

Throughout this period, the Freethought movement continued to provide a space for debating the more controversial subjects of divorce, monogamy and Free Love – subjects that the mainstream women's movement generally felt unable to discuss. Freethinkers had necessarily to reject the Christian conception of marriage as an irreversible union of two people under God, and in disallowing the fundamental premise of the current marriage system they found themselves free to imagine different ways of organising relations between the sexes. Secularists began to trace the historical development of the marriage institution. In 1870 a review in *The National Reformer* of Richard Harte's *Laws Relating to Marriage* paid special attention to his historical account, which argued that monogamy had only emerged as a result of changing economic conditions which caused polyandry and polygamy to become obsolete. The review strongly supported Harte's view that divorce was perfectly permissible and in accordance with 'the moral and physical necessities of human beings'.[51] Sara Hennell also set out to show how the prevailing system of Christian marriage was the result of the development of a system of private property. Polygamy had given way to monogamy in order to ensure that property was kept within the family. Monogamy had

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not, therefore, been initially conceived out of respect for connubial love or the wifely role, but from 'the gross covetousness of clutching firmly by worldly property'.[52] Modern 'Christian marriage' was, according to Hennell, merely a sentimentalised version of the commercial transactions that had taken place in earlier societies, so that 'the idea of sale and purchase in fact lurks throughout our own form of marriage contract'.[53] Having deprived Christian marriage of its sacred status, Freethinkers were compelled to consider whether it should be replaced with a different system and if so, what this should be.

The term 'free union' could mean many things. In rejecting the religious ceremony of marriage, Freethinkers had by default to accept the legitimacy of some form of free union, though they fiercely debated how such unions should be defined and organised. George Jacob Holyoake, in spite of his anxiety to proclaim the respectability of Secularism, remained committed to the need for more liberal divorce laws and the right of men and women to form unions free from the sanction of Church and State. In 1855 he wrote in *The Reasoner* that marriage might well be very 'respectable' but since the 'legal restrictions which marriage imposes upon women are so disrespectful … marriage itself is not entitled to much respect'. Holyoake was primarily concerned for the security and freedom of women, in both marriages and free unions. Divorce under the existing system should be allowed in order that women might escape abusive husbands, while if an alternative system of civil contracts were established it ought to ensure provision for children in the case of separations. However, Holyoake also opposed the current marriage laws because they introduced compulsion and coercion into relationships. 'We have not so poor an opinion of love,' he commented, 'as to agree to the doctrine that the policeman or the magistrate is necessary to enforce the attachment which affection has formed.' Holyoake maintained that marriage became 'odious' when it was made a 'tyranny', and divorce for incompatibility of temperament should therefore also be permitted. He concluded that 'we … have as much respect for the unmarried, as the married, *provided always* the affection is single, sincere, pure, honourable to relatives, and just to offspring'.[54]

Francis Newman, however, took a very different position on the subject of free unions. He maintained that in all societies throughout history, 'unchastity' – defined as sexual relations outside life-long marriage – guaranteed the 'degradation' of women. No man could ever love a woman, he believed, who had herself loved another, and women themselves would become destitute if their husbands were permitted to cast them off as soon as their attentions strayed elsewhere.[55] However,

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Newman did acknowledge that 'our existing laws do press hardly upon wives' who were unable to escape from 'tyrant' husbands, and he therefore struggled to imagine a morally viable alternative. Newman considered the case of Emma Martin, who had defied the law and left her abusive husband to live in a free union with another man. After much deliberation, Newman concluded that he could not condemn Martin's actions, and yet he also believed that some kind of institutional body was required to determine which relationships were 'just and sacred' and which were merely 'promiscuous'. Newman's concerns arose from the recognition that, in contemporary society, 'Marriage is *not* … a union of those who are like and equal … the man has more to gain, the woman to lose: for many reasons the woman needs *protection* by society …'[56]

Later in the century, some female Freethinkers continued to advocate free unions and freer divorce laws, even when this led to their marginalisation within the broader women's movement. Annie Besant believed that it was possible for both virtue and happiness to flourish under a more liberalised system of marriage laws. Besant employed the familiar Freethought technique of assuming the moral high ground from which to advocate practices that the majority of people would perceive as dangerously immoral. She insisted that she 'reverenced' marriage before going onto explain that:

> marriage is different as regarded from the Secularist and from the Christian point of view … [the Secularist] regards marriage as something far higher than a union 'blessed' by a minister; he considers also that marriage ought to be terminable like any other contract, when it fails in its object and becomes injurious instead of beneficial.[57]

Loveless marriages, Besant argued, led to immoral practices, whereas 'More reasonable marriage laws would … tend to lessen prostitution. Reasonable facility to divorce would tend to morality.'[58] This was to reiterate arguments put forward by the Owenite feminists in the 1830s and 1840s and George Drysdale in the 1850s – that the binding nature of the marriage contract produced vice by encouraging men to seek their pleasure among prostitutes, making women the victims of deception and disease. This argument took on a new significance in the context of the campaigns against the Contagious Diseases Acts, given that one of the campaign's main concerns was that 'innocent' wives were catching venereal diseases from their husbands. However, Besant drew a far more radical conclusion than many of her fellow repealers in the women's movement. She argued that chastity was not a solution to the problem of prostitution, for it denied the natural expression of sexuality:

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'the enforcement of celibacy on vigorous men always results in libertinage, whether among celibate priests or celibate soldiers'. Moreover, she proclaimed that '[the Secularist] does not despise human passion, or pretend that he has no body; on the contrary, reverencing nature, he regards physical union as perfecting the union of the heart and mind ….'[59] Annie Besant claimed that she 'differed considerably' from the views on marriage expressed in the *Elements of Social Science*, but she can nevertheless be found making similar claims for a positive view of sexuality and the need for the marriage bond to rest upon love and affection rather than religious or state authority.[60]

Annie Besant separated from her husband when she became a Freethinker, but unlike Emma Martin thirty years previously, never formed a free union with another man. Alice Vickery and Charles Drysdale formed a secret free union around 1870 but let it be assumed that they were legally married, for any public avowal might have spelt the end of Vickery's medical career.[61] However, another Freethinker, Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, did openly form a free union with Ben Elmy, the Vice President of the National Secular Society, the main opposition to which came from fellow feminists. The leaders of the women's movement rejected any liberalisation of divorce laws, and Millicent Garrett Fawcett declared that 'People … who think that marriages should be dissolved at will … are in effect anarchists … none of the leaders of the women's movement in England have ever countenanced for a moment anarchic methods or anarchic aims.'[62] When Wolstenholme Elmy became pregnant, fellow women's rights campaigners eventually pressured her into marrying Ben Elmy. Yet even this did not satisfy, and on her return to political activity after the birth of her son in 1875 Wolstenholme Elmy became the subject of an orchestrated campaign against her continuing public association with feminist organisations. Lydia Becker voted for her removal from the Married Women's Property Committee in Manchester (the motion failed), and also suggested to the meeting that the registry be checked to ensure that Wolstenholme Elmy's marriage really had taken place! Fawcett wrote privately to Wolstenholme Elmy condemning her conduct and asking her to remove herself from activities in order to prevent any further damage to the suffrage movement.[63]

On the whole, it seems that Freethinking feminists were more willing than their Christian sisters in the women's movement to at least tolerate and consider alternative modes of organising sexual relations. Historian Barbara Caine has described how the Victorian feminist movement, having consciously decided to take a cautious approach to questions of sexual morality, omitted any reference to Mary Wollstonecraft from their

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writings. This was, of course, because Wollstonecraft had conducted pre-marital affairs and had given birth to an illegitimate daughter.[64] By contrast, Harriet Law was happy to print a large portrait of Mary Wollstonecraft on the front page of the *Secular Chronicle* in 1878, accompanied by an enthusiastic biography written by Harriet Teresa Law.[65]


The Secular Chronicle,

EDITED BY MRS. HARRIET LAW.

Vol. IX.—No. 13.] SUNDAY, MARCH 31st, 1878. [One Penny.

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT ON THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN.

Figure 4 Mary Wollstonecraft as headline news in the *Secular Chronicle* (1878).

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Feminist ambivalence over the degree of marriage reform that should be advocated was, however, motivated not simply by a desire to keep up appearances, but also by the concern that unregulated sexual activity would leave women vulnerable to sexual exploitation, abandonment and financial destitution. Without reliable birth control and adequate education and employment opportunities, such concerns were not easily dismissed. Victorian society often justified the double sexual standard on the grounds that the male sexual drive was stronger than that of the female and could not therefore be so easily suppressed. The Matrimonial Act of 1857, for example, permitted men to divorce their wives for adultery but did not grant the same right to women. Supporters of the Contagious Diseases Acts similarly argued that male sexual desire made prostitution a necessary evil. The feminist response was to argue that, rather than make women the victims of male passion, men should conform to the same standards of chastity as women. They therefore often favourably contrasted sexual self-restraint with unbridled physical passion. Within such a context, it becomes possible to understand how the more conservative views of Francis Newman and Sophia Dobson Collet regarding free unions, and the refusal of Harriet Law to endorse the libertarianism of George Drysdale, could co-exist in the Freethought movement with a drive towards a freer vision of sexuality. It certainly suggests that 'anti-sensualism' was a more complex phenomenon than mere puritanism.

From the late 1880s onwards, however, there developed a greater openness in the women's movement towards wholesale attacks on the marriage system which went beyond criticism of its present-day abuses to condemn the institution in its entirety.[66] One of the most infamous contributions to this debate was Mona Caird's 1888 article for the *Westminster Review*, which provoked a furious response in the *Daily Telegraph* inviting 27,000 items of correspondence on the question 'Is Marriage a Failure'.[67] Caird condemned Christian marriage and argued that 'the ideal marriage should be free' – a 'private transaction' uninhibited by Church and State for two individuals to form and dissolve at will. Yet her argument also rested upon her freethinking outlook, drawing on older Secularist critiques of the pernicious effects of Christianity on the historical position of women. Caird, for example, argued that the reason for the present day denigration of women's sexuality could be traced back to the medieval Church, which had presented woman as a source of sin. The Reformation, far from improving the situation, had merely endorsed a marriage system which turned woman into man's private property.[68]

The influence of Freethought was clearly evident in almost all *fin de siècle* radical circles moving towards a greater openness to free unions.

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Mona Caird's *Westminster Review* article referred to the work of Karl Pearson, author of *The Ethic of Freethought* (1888), who, like Caird, held freethinking views without feeling the need to formally associate himself with the organised Secular party. Pearson was also the founder of the Men and Women's Club, formed in 1895 to discuss relations between the sexes with the stated intention of doing so 'from the historical and scientific as distinguished from the theological point of view'. Not all members of the Club were convinced by arguments for ending marriage, though its Secretary Maria Sharpe began to support free monogamous unions after undergoing a crisis of religious faith in the late 1880s.[69] Mona Caird's notorious article also referred to Jane Clapperton's recently published book *Scientific Meliorism* (1885). Like Caird, the freethinking Clapperton condemned existing marriages as 'an artificial sham' and called for future partnerships based upon a 'free' transaction which could be dissolved should the 'bonds of affection' be severed.[70] Such renewed interest in free unions did not, however, mean an end to the earlier concerns of both Freethinkers and feminists about the fate of women and children under a new and freer system. In the 1880s Sara Hennell advocated a new form of 'natural marriage' to replace that of the Church, whereby a woman would no longer be 'given away' by her father but instead make a declaration that she was to be married to a man of her own choice. Yet she concluded that duty towards the couple's children necessitated that the contract should be binding, even if 'affective passion' disappeared.[71] Jane Clapperton, on the other hand, thought '[d]issolution of marriage before parentage occurs ought to be a very simple affair, requiring only the expressed desire of both parties', while after the birth of the first child divorce should still be permitted yet be made 'more difficult and carefully guarded by society'.[72]

In 1893, when free unions were becoming a viable reality for a tiny radical minority, the Legitimation League was formed to secure legal recognition and protection for children born outside of Christian marriage. In 1895, however, its annual meeting controversially voted to expand its remit to include campaigning for the right to form free unions. The League emerged from a distinctly freethinking milieu, closely connected to the Personal Rights Association in which many Secularists had been active. The freethinking lawyer Wordsworth Donisthorpe became the second President of the League (resigning in 1895) and Jane Clapperton, Alice Vickery and Charles Drysdale were also associates.[73] In 1897 the League launched a journal entitled *The Adult*, which variously identified itself as 'A Journal for the Advancement of Freedom in Sexual Relationships', 'A Crusade Against Sex-enslavement' and, finally, 'A Journal of Sex'.[74]

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The Adult justified its extreme subject matter on grounds of free discussion and free dissemination of knowledge – employing a rhetoric that had been refined over the generations within the Freethought movement: 'Frankness, before all things, is necessary if we are to wrench from the clutches of the Past any of the lessons it may hold in its grasp' declared editor George Bedborough, noting that 'Readers of The Adult are invited to criticise the suggestions, arguments and opinions published in this journal.'[75] 'Free Thought and Free Love' became a popular topic for discussion in the pages of *The Adult*, with the self-proclaimed Free Lovers now declaring that organised Freethought had become too cautious on the question. In 1897 one contributor, Lucy Stewart, noted that although 'it is frequently asserted from the Christian Evidence platform that Secularists believe in free love', in reality most Secularists prefer to disassociate themselves from it out of a slavish desire to be '*respectable*'.[76] Bedborough likewise commented that, 'judged by their attitude towards the free love movement there seems little difference between the average parson and the average Freethought leader'. He approvingly reviewed a pamphlet authored by Orford Northcote, a frequent contributor to *The Adult*, which provided a history of the relationship between Freethought and Free Love over the course of the nineteenth century and accused the existing Secularist leaders of betraying this proud tradition.[77]

The Free Lovers were, to some extent, justified in claiming that Secularists preferred to disassociate themselves from the vigorous support of free unions proclaimed by *The Adult*. *The Freethinker* (edited by the NSS President G. W. Foote) formally supported the Legitimation League and the right of *The Adult* to voice its opinions, but simultaneously remarked that 'the world wants more *discipline* instead of more *freedom* in sexual relationships'.[78] J. M. Robertson permitted Free Love advocates to write for *The National Reformer*, while stressing that such views did not reflect the editorial line.[79] *The Reformer*, however, declined to advertise the Legitimation League's meetings in its 'Directory of Reform Societies'. Its editors, Hypatia and Arthur Bradlaugh Bonner, wrote to *The Adult* in 1897–98 to state that they had been 'entirely in sympathy' with the Legitimation League when it was originally founded, but could not condone its new policy of *positively* advocating Free Love.[80]

Had, then, the Freethought leadership of the 1890s renounced the movement's earlier commitment to fighting for 'free utterance of opinion'? By the end of the century prominent Free Lovers were more likely to come from a broadly unaffiliated freethinking milieu rather than directly from the ranks of organised Freethought. And with the explosion of a radical press, encompassing a vast range of heterodox political currents,

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sex radicals no longer relied so heavily upon Freethinking publishers and periodicals to circulate their views.[81] It is, however, important not to allow the rhetoric of *The Adult* to over-determine our understanding of the Secularists' respectability. In fact, Freethinkers' views on marriage still positioned them firmly beyond the pale of conventional, even radical, morality.[82] In 1898 Charles Watts, while professing to deplore 'loose views' on the question, nevertheless 'frankly advocated' divorce by mutual consent.[83] Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner may have found *The Adult* distasteful, but she published in her own newspaper affectionate endorsements of the 'pure' free unions formed by Mary Wollstonecraft and George Eliot. She remained true to the longstanding Freethought position that to remain married once love and happiness had gone was, in the words of one of her contributors, 'the most revolting crime that a man and a woman can commit'.[84]

The arguments between the Secularists and *The Adult* were less about clearly wrought differences of opinion, and more about contested definitions of the terms 'free union' and 'Free Love'. At the Legitimation League's annual meeting for 1897, George Bedborough, editor of *The Adult*, was asked to define 'freedom in sexual relationships'. He initially declined to do so, clearly aware of the contentious and potentially divisive effects this could have. Two months later, however, he clarified his position in *The Adult* by stating that 'Freedom merely means the absence of external restraint, and Free Love implies dispensing with the interference of the lawyer and the priest in sexual relationships.'[85] None of this was at odds with the Secularist position, and Charles Watts claimed to have 'great sympathy for free-love' if taken to mean that 'there should be proper means whereby the man and the woman should separate'.[86] Yet some contributors to *The Adult* took this celebration of freedom to imply a far more fundamental break with monogamy. Orford Northcote, for example, argued that the natural 'mutability of sex love' ought to be embraced rather than resisted, while Lucy Stewart declared that although most couples would probably continue to practise monogamy, it was important not to judge those who engaged in more fleeting connections.[87]

Feminist concerns played an important role in deterring some Freethinkers from what could become a distinctly male-centred vision of Free Love. Orford Northcote, for example, suggested that prostitution might be justified under present circumstances since there were so few adequately liberated 'free women' to satisfy the wants of those brave men who had managed to 'throw off the prison of monogamy'.[88] The Secularist leadership continued to make 'the old argument' that some form of contract in heterosexual relations was required to protect the

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woman. *The Freethinker* declared that: 'a man who neglects his wife and children, whatever he be, is no Secularist'.[89] Prominent Freethinkers in the 1890s thus backed away from an endorsement of 'fanatical' Free Love, but they did not reject it wholesale.[90] Their movement remained closely associated with campaigns for greater freedom in sexual relations, and part of the reason *The Adult* paid so much attention to the Secularists was precisely because their rank and file continued to be the most likely recruits to the Free Love cause.[91] Despite his criticisms of the Freethought leadership, Orford Northcote informed them in 1898 that: 'How you act in the coming struggle, largely depends the issue.'[92] The Secularist movement continued, at the end of the nineteenth century, to be recognised as a necessary and powerful ally in the Free Love cause.

Birth control

The Knowlton trial

Prominent birth control advocates had, since the beginning of the nineteenth century, almost invariably been Freethinkers and had found most support for their ideas within the Freethought movement.[93] Richard Carlile's *Every Woman's Book or What is Love?* (1826) was one of the earliest practical guides to contraception. Freethinkers also authored the other leading nineteenth-century works on birth control. Robert Owen's son, Robert Dale Owen, published *Moral Physiology* in 1830 and the American doctor Charles Knowlton wrote *Fruits of Philosophy* in 1832. Both of these continued to be published and circulated in Britain by Secularist publishers over the course of the century. Freethinking beliefs occupied a central place in these early writings on birth control. Richard Carlile's description of sponges and the withdrawal method sat alongside a critique of Christian symbolism, while for Charles Knowlton the 'philosophical' part of his treatise (which argued that the celibacy practised by monks and nuns was harmful since 'reason' taught us not to 'war against' nature), was as important as his explanation of the zinc syringe as a means of avoiding conception.[94] Leading figures in the Secularist movement continued to support birth control in the ensuing decades. Emma Martin's 'private physiological lectures to ladies', which she began in 1845 after training as a midwife, sought to educate women about their reproductive functions and probably included advice on how to avoid unwanted pregnancies.[95] George Jacob Holyoake and his brother Austin had published Knowlton's book long before Besant and Bradlaugh were prosecuted for its publication, and Austin Holyoake had himself written a birth control tract entitled *Large or Small Families* which referred to

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previous Freethought works on the subject, including George Drysdale's *Elements of Social Science*.[96] Drysdale, writing as G. R., had lent his support to the first 'Malthusian League' established by Charles Bradlaugh in 1861, and although the League was short-lived, articles on Malthusian economics and sometimes on preventative checks regularly appeared in *The National Reformer* throughout the 1860s.[97] When Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh republished Knowlton's *Fruits of Philosophy* in 1877 their introduction emphasised the long tradition of Freethinking support for birth control, asserting that 'for the last fifty years the book has thus been identified by Freethought, advertised by Freethinkers, published under the sanction of their names and sold in the headquarters of Freethought literature'.[98]

The trial of Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh on charges of obscenity for the publication of Charles Knowlton's *Fruits of Philosophy* thus represented the culmination of a long relationship between Secularism and birth control advocacy. In 1876 a Bristol bookseller, Mr Cook, was arrested for selling copies of the Knowlton pamphlet published by the leading Secularist Charles Watts, to which Cook had added lewd illustrations. Watts was subsequently charged with publishing an obscene work. He initially planned to defend Knowlton's book in court, but on closer reading and on hearing of Cook's illustrations, he changed his mind and pleaded guilty. Besant and Bradlaugh were furious at what they saw as a capitulation to the enemies of free speech.[99] After breaking off all business connections with Charles Watts and dismissing him from subeditorship of *The National Reformer*, Besant and Bradlaugh established their own Freethought Publishing Company and set about publishing a new edition of *Fruits of Philosophy*, with notes by 'the author of the *Elements of Social Science*'. They did not fully endorse all the medical advice contained in the Knowlton Pamphlet, believing scientific expertise to have advanced since its original publication, but they justified their decision to republish on the grounds that 'free discussion ought to be maintained at all hazards … so that the public, enabled to see all sides of the question, may have the materials for forming a sound judgement'.[100] Besant and Bradlaugh were fully aware that such action would lead to their prosecution and they intended to make the re-publication of the Knowlton Pamphlet a test case for freedom of the press. They were arrested in June 1877 and their trial, for which they both conducted their own defence, received an enormous amount of attention within and beyond the Secularist movement. Besant and Bradlaugh were found guilty by the jury and were sentenced to six months' imprisonment, but their sentence was subsequently revoked on a technicality.

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During the 'Knowlton trial', Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh were both celebrated and condemned by their fellow Secularists. Most rank and file activists supported them as champions of free speech and freedom of the press, suggesting that by this period the majority of the movement supported the practice of birth control, at least within marriage.[101] Moreover, even those Secularists who denounced Bradlaugh and Besant's decision to publish were in some cases actually in favour of birth control. Kate Watts' *Reply to Mr. Bradlaugh's Misrepresentations* (1877) condemned the President of the National Secular Society for his authoritarian style of leadership and for his unjust dismissal of her husband, who had been genuinely concerned to avoid tarnishing the good name of Freethought with an unworthy publication. But Kate Watts did not declare herself opposed to birth control itself, and in fact concluded that 'to a certain extent the subject matter [of the Knowlton Pamphlet] is good, but … I did not like the style'.[102] G. W. Foote similarly objected to Bradlaugh's failure to consult the rest of the National Secular Society before launching headlong into a highly public and controversial trial. Yet he too professed himself in favour of preventative checks as a means of controlling population.[103] George Jacob Holyoake and Harriet Law both sat on the platform at the first Secularist meeting called to protest against Bradlaugh and Besant's decision to republish, but ultimately chose to remain neutral on the question. Neither of them attempted to distance themselves from the shock waves of scandal that emanated from the trial by voicing any opposition to birth control.[104] On the other hand, conservative concerns for respectability did influence elements of opposition to the re-publication of *Fruits of Philosophy*. Harriet Law made clear that she 'did not approve' of the Knowlton Pamphlet and said that her experience as a 'propagandist' had led her to conclude that the association of Freethought with 'literature of the class to which the book in question belongs' made it harder to convince people of the principles of Secularism.[105] Foote felt that the Secularist commitment to free discussion did not extend to a subject as delicate as population control, and that Freethinkers damaged their reputation by encouraging such a debate among the general public rather than restricting it to medical experts.[106]

Early campaigns for birth control were not necessarily motivated by enthusiasm for women's rights or a desire for greater sexual freedom. Neo-Malthusians were, as the name suggests, primarily concerned with the propagation of Malthusian economics in an attempt to convince the poor to limit the size of their families. As a result, there also existed a long tradition of working-class, and later Socialist, opposition to birth

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control, on the basis that Malthusianism implied that the workers themselves were to blame for their poverty.[107] The vast majority of Bradlaugh and Besant's 1877 defence and subsequent Malthusian League propaganda consisted not of the feminist case for a woman's right to avoid unwanted pregnancy, but of an exposition of Malthusian economics. Although the doctrine of over-population appears to have been partially motivated by a genuine concern for the miserable condition of the poor, they had little sympathy for those who 'recklessly' produced large families for which they could not provide.[108]

However, it is clear from the Secularist journals that readers were also familiar with framing the birth control question as one of women's rights. When a sentence of 'guilty' was passed on Besant and Bradlaugh, J. Symes,[109] a regular contributor to the Secularist press, wrote:

> Had those twelve men been replaced by the same number of intelligent matrons the verdict must have been 'Not Guilty'. The question at issue is a woman's question; and the verdict of the jury and the barbarous sentence of the judge are another blow aimed at the 'rights of women'.[110]

Prof. Emile Acollas, author of a manual on French law, also wrote to *The National Reformer* in support of Besant and Bradlaugh but stated that it was unfortunate that the Knowlton Pamphlet viewed the subject 'exclusively from a man's point of view … woman, to develope [sic] herself morally, intellectually and physically, must have the same rights as man'.[111] Prior the Knowlton trial, in 1869, a woman wrote to *The National Reformer* attacking those who claimed that there was no support for Malthusianism among women. To the contrary, claimed this female correspondent, it was women, over-burdened with large families, who most desired access to preventative checks. Her own experience suggested that many among her sex strongly supported birth control, not because they were concerned with theories of over-population (which she felt to be largely irrelevant to the subject) but because they regarded it a means towards increased personal freedom.[112]

As this woman's letter hinted, the birth control question also suggested the possibility of greater *sexual* freedom for women. During the Knowlton trial, the spectre of unbridled female sexuality was initially invoked by the Prosecution. One of their main arguments was that, by selling the pamphlet at the low price of sixpence, Besant and Bradlaugh had made it too readily available to 'unscrupulous people' including 'young women' who might use it to escape the consequences of their immoral sexual urges.[113] Annie Besant responded with a defence of sexual feeling and the principle of physical pleasure. 'There is nothing wrong in

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a natural desire rightly and properly gratified,' she asserted, 'and there is no harm in gratifying sexual instinct if it can be exercised in manner without injury to anyone else …' She went on to argue that '[I]t is only a false and spurious kind of modesty which sees harm in gratification of one of the highest instincts of human nature.'[114]

Others in the Secularist movement made more explicit arguments in favour of women's right to sexual promiscuity and enjoyment free from the fear of pregnancy. As a man, J. Symes was able to draw far more radical conclusions than Besant in his attack on the double sexual standard. He wrote to *The National Reformer* asking, 'In the first place, why should not young girls be allowed to make vice as safe for themselves as the young men do?'[115] Such a statement harked back to an older, minority tradition of supporting birth control on grounds of increased sexual freedom for women. Richard Carlile had also argued that preventative checks should be celebrated for allowing women to initiate sexual liaisons and putting an end to the stigmatisation of women who chose to take lovers.[116] George Drysdale too argued that women should be given access to birth control in order to allow them freely to indulge their sexual passions.[117]

Such positive attitudes to female sexuality were not representative of the entirety of the Freethought movement, and the Knowlton trial also generated far more conservative responses. In his usual misogynist mode, W. S. Ross dismissed arguments that birth control would relieve women from health risks and the economic burden of multiple pregnancies, insisting instead, 'That wives are not always happy is no reason why women should be unmarried harlots.' He then went onto paint a lurid picture of the 'shameless and deflowered harlot … who constantly carries a syringe in her muff in the name of Mr. Bradlaugh and Freethought.'[118] Francis Newman, however, founded his opposition to the 'Corruption Now Called Neo-Malthusianism' on explicitly feminist grounds. In a pamphlet produced by the Moral Reform Union and annotated by the female doctor and women's rights campaigner Elizabeth Blackwell, Newman argued that birth control was in fact designed to serve the wishes of a 'sensual' husband and was therefore 'very dangerous to his wife'.[119]

Newman's belief that any means of preventing the natural consequences of marital love would in fact compel women to make themselves permanently sexually available to their husbands was shared by many of those active in the women's movement. While the majority of feminists within Secularism supported birth control, the majority of feminists outside organised Freethought opposed it.[120] Birth control was, therefore,

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an issue on which Freethinking feminists were very much at odds with the rest of the women's movement. The Bradlaugh–Besant trial was totally ignored by the two leading feminist journals of the time, the *Victoria Magazine* and the *Englishwomen's Review,* a bizarre silence given the enormous amount of attention it generated in the rest of the press.[121] Charles Bradlaugh had attempted to call Millicent Garrett Fawcett and her economist husband Henry as witnesses for the defence, in the belief that Henry had previously implied support for the use of preventative checks in his writings on population control. Henry Fawcett was outraged and threatened to send Millicent out of the country in order to prevent her having to attend court.[122] The Fawcetts not only objected to Bradlaugh's assumption that they would defend an obscene book, but also to the practice of birth control itself. Millicent Garrett Fawcett wrote to Bradlaugh stating that 'so far as my knowledge of the [Knowlton] book enables me to speak, I entirely agree with the opinion I have frequently heard Mr. Fawcett express, and this opinion, as I believe you know, is strongly condemnatory of the character of the book'.[123] In May 1887 the National Vigilance Association passed a motion, supported by Elizabeth Blackwell and Laura Chant, which approved the prosecution of 'persons selling indecent publications inciting sexual immoralities' and stated that 'we strongly disapprove of the use of any means … which in restricting the increase in population, suggests that vice is a necessity … and … which tends to relax the incentive for moral restraint'.[124]

However, one should not imagine a polarity between 'pro-pleasure' or 'sensualist' Freethinking feminists and 'anti-sex' or 'anti-sensualist' mainstream (Christian) feminists. As Lucy Bland has shown, attitudes to sexuality during this period were more complex than that.[125] Both Freethinking feminist Neo-Malthusians and feminist opponents of birth control were concerned to increase women's control over their bodies. Freethinking support for birth control was rooted in an older radical tradition of medical self-help: Emma Martin's physiological lectures for ladies, for example, were part of this culture of democratised health care.[126] Yet the desire to acquire a better understanding of one's body in order to promote greater independence and self-control was also central to other feminist approaches to sexual morality during the second half of the nineteenth century.[127] Both the social purity, anti-Malthusian feminist Elizabeth Blackwell and the Secularist Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy wrote sex education manuals in the hope that, if women were equipped with knowledge of their reproductive functions they would be less vulnerable to sexual exploitation.[128] The historian Margaret Jackson, in an attempt to set up a dichotomy between social purity feminists and

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pro-(masculine) sex feminists, classed Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy alongside Blackwell as 'militant' feminists who were concerned to replace the male-orientated conception of sex as a primarily physical act with a more woman-centred spiritual vision. She contrasted them to Annie Besant, whose support for free unions and birth control led Jackson to class her as a 'libertarian'.[129] And yet, Besant was an old acquaintance of Wolstenholme Elmy, who was among the first to publicly sign up to Besant and Bradlaugh's defence committee during the Knowlton trial. The boundaries between different feminist positions on birth control, as in the case of attitudes towards free unions, were more blurred than categories such as 'sensualist', 'libertarian' and 'conservative' imply.

The Malthusian League, 1877–1914

After the Knowlton trial Secularists remained central to pushing the question of birth control in the women's movement, and the Malthusian League, re-established after 1877, committed itself to an explicitly feminist agenda.[130] In 1879 Besant made the basic feminist case for birth control in the pages of the League's journal the *Malthusian*. Husbands complained that their wives 'take no interest in the larger life outside the house' and do not engage with the 'intellectual movement of the age'. Yet, Besant pointed out, a woman forced to bear many children, condemned to the exhausting job of caring for a large family, naturally had no time for discussing 'sociology'. Women needed control over their own bodies not simply to avoid ill health but also to secure an independent existence.

> Woman is not only for man, she also has a right to her own life, and to condemn her to constant childbearing, to consume the prime of her life in continual illness and recovery, is an injustice to herself and a grave injury to society.[131]

Besant and Bradlaugh both stepped back from the Malthusian League in the late 1870s, leaving it largely in the hands of the Freethinking medical couple Alice Vickery and Charles Drysdale (brother of the infamous George).[132] Vickery began lecturing for the League as soon as she finished qualifying as a doctor in 1880 and her main emphasis was on the positive effects of birth control for women, addressing subjects such as 'The Position of Women in Overcrowded Countries' and 'The Position of Women as Affected by Large Families'. Vickery also made various attempts in 1891 and 1904 to form a women's section of the League charged with the task of formulating a 'new morality'. Though no formal women's caucus was ever established, Vickery did host regular

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'ladies' meetings at her home which trained other women to lecture and advocate in support of the Neo-Malthusian cause.[133]

Towards the end of the century, support for birth control was slowly beginning to gain ground in the mainstream women's movement. When the Freethinker Florence Fenwick Miller joined Bradlaugh and Besant's defence committee in 1877, she was looked at askance by leaders of the suffrage campaign, endangering her career as lecturer for the cause.[134] By 1896, however, Fenwick Miller was able to place an advertisement for a birth control manual in *The Woman's Signal*, without jeopardising her editorship of this leading feminist periodical.[135] Jane Clapperton and Florence Dixie were among other freethinking feminists publicly advocating Neo-Malthusianism in the 1880s and 1890s.[136] Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner's *Reformer* also supported birth control, even printing an article in favour of abortion.[137] By the beginning of the twentieth century Neo-Malthusianism also received the support of prominent suffrage activists Edith How-Martyn and Teresa Billington, who, along with Alice Vickery and her daughter-in-law Bessie Drysdale, formed the Women's Freedom League in 1907.

Bessie Drysdale (née Ingman Edwards) was already a freethinking Ethical Society member and supporter of family limitation when she married Alice's son Charles Vickery Drysdale in 1898. Bessie and Charles Vickery quickly assumed a central role in the Malthusian League. Their leadership amplified an already existing current of eugenicist thought, and they argued that physically unfit individuals should be discouraged from reproducing.[138] The new couple combined birth control advocacy with support for a wide range of women's rights: Bessie served time in Holloway Prison for militant suffrage activity in 1907 and Charles Vickery joined the Men's League for Women's Franchise that same year.[139] In 1911 and 1912 he promoted the feminist case for birth control in the pages of *The Freewoman*, calling upon 'feminist leaders' to recognise the centrality of control over maternity to the wider struggle for emancipation. His aim was to both challenge and reassure those in the women's movement who remained hostile to or uncertain of Neo-Malthusian methods: 'in addressing Women's Suffrage meetings, even in the open air,' he insisted, 'I have personally received nothing but the most respectful and interested attention.'[140] Charles Vickery condemned 'the horrible ideas concerning "purity" and "sin" put forward by religion'. These, he argued, 'told chiefly upon women' and often result in the unnatural repression of female sexuality, which was otherwise as powerful as man's.[141]

Secularism, as both intellectual framework and political network, remained important to the birth control movement into the twentieth

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century. Though the majority of the Malthusian League's propaganda continued to consist of turgid proselytising for Malthusian economics, it did also disseminate some practical advice, first in Besant's *Law of Population* (1878), then in the *Malthusian Handbook* (1893) by Secularist George Standring, and finally in its own pamphlet in 1913.[142] The majority of working-class women were not able to access information on contraception until after the First World War, when Marie Stopes opened the first birth control clinic in Holloway, London in 1921. Historian Miriam Benn has suggested that by this period the Drysdale-Vickery family were becoming outflanked in their own movement by activists such as Stella Browne, who, as a lecturer for the Malthusian League from 1914, eschewed economic lectures in favour of direct and practical advice. Yet Benn also noted the crucial role this Freethinking family played in paving the way for birth control dissemination in the post-war era. Alice Vickery had always advocated some form of district visiting or family visits in which women could be informed about 'hygiene' (the common euphemism for contraception). She had also endorsed the idea of giving practical lectures to single sex audiences as early as 1896, though this was not carried out in any large scale way until 1917 when Vickery provided clinical instruction for about one hundred working-class women in Rotherhithe, London. Along with Charles Vickery and Bessie, Alice also helped to set up and financially support a Women's Welfare Clinic in South London founded only a few months after Stopes' clinic.[143]

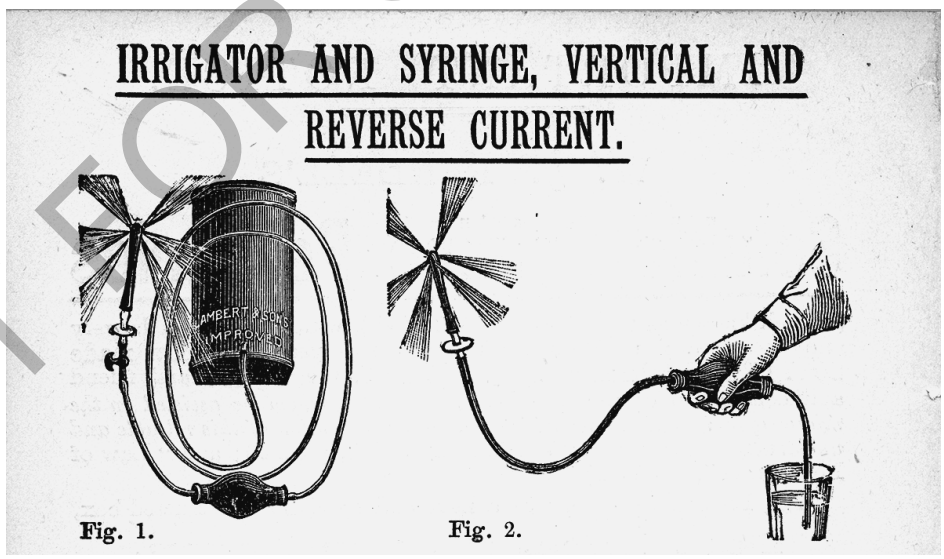

Figure 5 Advertisement for vaginal douche to be used as contraceptive device in 1889 edition of Annie Besant's *Law of Population*.

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The intimate relationship between Secularism and Malthusianism has rarely been accounted for, in that many historians have taken it as a given that birth control should have been backed by secular thinkers rather than exploring the 'how' and 'why' of Freethought as a movement disseminating, championing, and agonising over the principles of family limitation.[144] J. A. Bank's work on *Secularism and the Size of Families* is exceptional in providing an in-depth analysis of 'The Religious Roots of Malthusian Controversy', discussing some of the ways in which Freethought lent intellectual foundations to birth control advocacy.[145] Yet Banks conceived of nineteenth-century Secularism as a set of ideas rather than as a political movement, and so failed to identify the links between Freethinkers' Malthusianism and their feminist activities. He concluded that it was not possible to say whether Secularist Malthusians advocated birth control as an aid to female emancipation and incorrectly identified 'pioneer feminists' such as Bessie Raynor Parkes and Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon as having separate and distinct political goals from the Freethinkers.[146] Foregrounding the role of the Freethought movement in the development of birth control advocacy in fact reveals many hitherto unrecognised women's rights connections and sheds new light on the ambiguous relationship between feminism and family limitation.

Conclusion

Freethought made an important contribution to Victorian thinking on sexuality, especially to the development of feminist attitudes to heterosexual love and marriage. Sexual morality became the focus for Secularists' attempts to establish an ethical framework independent of the Church. Whether they liked it or not, Freethinkers' renunciation of Christianity also entailed a rejection of the very foundations upon which traditional ideas of marriage and sexuality rested. This opened the way to alternative models of sexual relations, resulting in a number of different proposals being put forward within Freethinking circles throughout the century. Some Secularists, such as George Drysdale, favoured an extreme libertarian vision of multiple sexual relationships allowing for the full enjoyment of physical passion. This was justified in explicitly Freethinking terms, as a celebration of the physical and material world over the spiritual, and as the logical conclusion of the Secularist principles of freedom and moral autonomy of the individual. However, this Freethinking vision of sexual freedom was also strongly opposed by others in the movement, who not only feared for the reputation of Secularism but were also concerned to guard against the exploitation of women. Debates and

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divisions within Freethought need to be understood, therefore, in the context of the movement's longstanding feminist tradition.

Freethought was an important factor in the emergence of sex radicalism at the turn of the twentieth century. Despite ambivalence among the Secularist leadership, the Free Lovers at *The Adult* were right to compare themselves to the 'heretics and freethinkers of old' who sought only the right to question conventional belief systems.[147] The arrest in 1898 of George Bedborough, editor of *The Adult*, proved once and for all that, on questions of free discussion, Free Lovers and Freethinkers were united. Bedborough was charged for selling Havelock Ellis' *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* – a sexology volume that dealt with 'sexual inversion' (homosexuality). Copies of *The Adult* were also seized by police, resulting in ten more obscenity charges. The Secularists immediately rose to the challenge, with G. W. Foote heading up Bedborough's Freedom of the Press Defence Committee, whose members included G. J. Holyoake, and other leading Freethinkers J. M. Robertson, George Standring, Edward Truelove and Charles Watts. Many of these men had themselves faced imprisonment for charges of blasphemy or obscenity. They ultimately proved more stalwart in defence of the sex radicals than Bedborough himself, who made a deal with the police and pleaded guilty to three charges of obscenity.[148]Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner also opposed the arrest of Bedborough and defended Havelock Ellis' book as 'a scientific work by a writer of such distinction'.[149] Secularists were again at the centre of things when, a decade later, sex radicals at *The Freewoman* mounted a direct challenge to the respectability of the women's movement through an explicit assertion of woman's right to freedom of sexual expression.[150] *The Freewoman* was banned by W. H. Smith newsagents in 1912, but was strongly supported by Freethinkers both as readers and contributors.[151] By the eve of the First World War, as Jacqueline de Vries had noted, the sexual transgression of the 'New Women' and 'Freewomen' was firmly associated in the public mind with religious scepticism and Freethought – an association which can now be understood and traced back to a feminist current which began in the Freethinking movements of the early nineteenth century.[152]

Notes

1 For the influence and importance of *Elements*, see J. M. Benn, *The Predicaments of Love* (London: Pluto Press, 1992); M. Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexual Attitudes* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

2 *The National Reformer* (*NR*), 14 June 1862, pp. 6–7.

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3 For a full biography of George Drysdale, see Benn (1992).
4 G. Drysdale, *The Elements of Social Science; or, Physical, Sexual and Natural Religion by a Graduate of Medicine* 7th edn (London: Edward Truelove, 1867) (first published 1854), pp. 1–8, 161.
5 *Ibid*., pp. 427–31.
6 *Ibid*., p. 373.
7 *Ibid*., pp. 368, 78, 353–5, 377.
8 The terms 'birth control' and 'contraception' were unheard of in the nineteenth century, when advocates referred either to 'preventative checks' or, even more obliquely, to 'Malthusianism'. All these terms, however, will be used interchangeably in this chapter for ease of expression.
9 Drysdale (1867), pp. 1, 64, 157–60, 13.
10 *Ibid*., pp. 355–6, 172.
11 *Ibid*., pp. 378–9.
12 *Ibid*., p. 376.
13 *Ibid*., p. 380.
14 Benn (1992), pp. 10, 14; Mason (1994), p. 204.
15 For a discussion of accusations of sexual depravity levelled at Owenite feminists, see B. Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem. Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Virago, 1983).
16 *Investigator*, August 1854, pp. 77–9.
17 *The Reasoner* (*Reasoner*), 25 March 1855, p. 198.
18 *Ibid*., 10 September 1854, pp. 161–2.
19 *Ibid.*, 6 May 1855, p. 44.
20 *Ibid.*, 3 June 1855, p. 76.
21 *Ibid.*, 8 July 1855, p. 116.
22 *NR*, 12 May 1860, p. 8.
23 For a fuller account of this split, see Benn (1992), p. 15.
24 *Barker's Review*, 7 September 1861, pp. 3–6.
25 *Barker's Review*, 7 September 1861, p. 16, 28 September 1861, p. 57.
26 For an interesting perspective on the militant moralism of Secularism, see G. Himmelfarb, *Victorian Minds* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1968) (first published 1952), pp. 300–13.
27 Mason believes that support within the Secularist movement for *Elements* was about equal to outright hostility to it, with a very large section prevaricating or compromising; Mason (1994), pp. 207–8.
28 *Reasoner*, 5 August 1855, p. 150.
29 *Ibid.*, 29 July 1855, p. 142, 24 February 1856, p. 59.
30 *Barker's Review*, 7 September 1861, pp. 29–30.
31 This is seen as part of a general shift within radicalism away from the utopian visions of the early part of the century in favour of trade unionism and self improvement; J. Belcham, *Popular Radicalism in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Macmillan, 1996). The earlier desire to transform the social roles of men and women, and the ways in which they related to each other, is seen to have disappeared from radical movements in this period; R. Porter & L. Hall (eds.), *The Facts of Life: The Creation of Sexual Knowledge in Britain 1650–1850* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press,

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1995); G. Frost, *Living in Sin: Cohabiting as Husband and Wife in Nineteenth-Century England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), pp. 195, 197.

32 Mason (1994).

33 Mason has been widely criticised for ignoring the importance of feminist contributions to wider nineteenth-century thinking on sexuality; see M. Vicinus, 'Review of Michael Mason's *The Making of Victorian Sexuality* and *The Making of Victorian Sexual Attitudes*', *Journal of Social History* 29:2 (1995), 470–2; F. Mort & L. Nead, 'Sexuality, Modernity and the Victorians', *Journal of Victorian Culture* 1:1 (Spring 1996), 118–30; J. Bristow, 'Respecting Respectability: "Victorian Sexuality" and the Copulatory Imagination', *History Workshop Journal* 41 (Spring 1996), 286–92.

34 For Law's response to *Elements*, see *NR*, 30 November 1861, p. 8.

35 *NR*, 14 June 1862, pp. 6–7.

36 *Ibid*., p. 7.

37 P. Annet, *Social Bliss Considered* (1749), quoted in J. Fieser (ed.), *Early Responses to Hume. Moral, Literary and Political Writings* 2 vols (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1999) ii, pp. 13–19. Other works in this tradition of libertine sex reform include Thomas Holcroft, *Anna St. Ives* (1792); W. Godwin, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793); H. Kitchner, *Letter on Marriage* (1812); J. Lawrence, *The Empire of the Nairs* (1811); Dr Thomas Bell's *Kalogynomia* (1821). For a discussion of such work, see M. L. Bush, *What Is Love? Richard Carlile's Philosophy of Sex* (New York & London: Verso, 1998), pp. 32–4; Taylor (2003), pp. 198–202; Frost (2008), pp. 170–80. Iain McCalman has argued that late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century plebeian infidels encouraged the association between religious and sexual unorthodoxy, and that radical Freethinking circles overlapped with the world of illegal pornography; see I. McCalman, *Radical Underworld. Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London, 1815–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

38 R. Carlile, *Every Woman's Book or What is Love?* (London, 1826, repr. Bush (1998)), pp. 55–80, 88–9.

39 R. Owen, *Lectures on the Marriages of the Priesthood in the Old Immoral World* (Leeds: J. Hobson, 1835); R. Owen, *The Marriage System in the New Moral World* (Leeds: J. Hobson, 1838). For a full account of Owenite critiques of marriage and the family, see Taylor (1983).

40 *New Moral World* (*NMW*), 11 July 1840, pp. 19–20. These arguments were made by many others in the movement, including Frances Wright, Frances Morrison and Catherine and Goodwyn Barmby. By the time Martin began her lecturing career they had become a generally, if not universally, accepted part of the Owenite platform; for example, see *NMW*, 12 June 1841, p. 377.

41 *NMW*, 27 October 1838, p. 3.

42 Martin, *Religion Superseded*, pp. 6–7.

43 *NMW*, 9 May 1840, p. 1300.

44 For Christian attacks, see R. Matthews, *Is Marriage Worth Perpetuating? The Ninth of a Series of Lectures against Socialism Delivered in the Mechanics' Institution, Southampton Buildings, Under the Direction of the Committee of the London City Mission* (London: n.p., 1840). For female opposition to Owenite feminism see an account of hostility to Margaret Chappellsmith ('her with the seven husbands'), *NMW*, 26 June 1841, p. 402. See also Taylor (1983), Chapter 6. Working-class women's

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concern about attacks on the conventional marriage system had been expressed prior to the emergence of Owenite feminism. When Richard Carlile published *Every Woman's Book* he encountered open hostility from women in some working–class communities; see Bush (1998), p. 122. Secularists faced similar attacks from Christians much later in the century. In 1881, for example, the Bishop of Manchester, Dr Fraser, told an audience of working men that Secularism taught men and women infidelity and encouraged men to abandon their wives when they became sick; *The Freethinker* (*Freethinker*), 23 October 1881, p. 91. Annie Besant's pamphlet, *God's Views on Marriage*, was intended as a reply to such 'slander', and dedicated to Dr Fraser, pointing out that the Bible itself was the purveyor of such 'immoral' views. See also *Freethinker*, 25 December 1881, p. 167.

45 The first organised campaign for marriage reform was sparked off by the publication of Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon's *A Brief Summary in Plain Language of the Most Important Laws Concerning Women* (1854), which led the Law Amendment Society to introduce a Married Women's Property Bill that proposed to allow wives the same right as single women to make a will and hold property.

46 *NR*, 21 February 1869, p. 125, 25 April 1869, p. 267.

47 A. Besant, *The Political Status of Women* 3rd edn (London: Freethought Publishing Co., 1874[?], repr. J. Saville (ed.), *A Selection of the Social and Political Pamphlets of Annie Besant. With a Preface and Biographical Notes by John Saville*, New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1970), p. 11; *Secular Review* (*SR*), 27 September 1879, pp. 193–4, 4 October 1879, pp. 212–14, 18 October 1879, pp. 246–7.

48 S. S. Hennell, *Present Religion as Faith Owning Fellowship with Thought*, 3 vols (London: Trubnor & Co., 1865, 1873, 1887) iii (1887), pp. 351–3, 348–9.

49 See P. Levine, '"So Few Prizes and So Many Blanks": Marriage and Feminism in Later Nineteenth-Century England', *Journal of British Studies* 28 (April 1989), 150–74. *The National Reformer* lauded the success of the 1870 Married Women's Property Bill (though it noted that it did not meet all the feminists' demands) and lent its support to Wolstenholme Elmy's continued campaign; *NR*, 28 August 1870, p. 135, 18 August 1874, p. 251, 21 January 1877, p. 39, 18 March 1877, pp. 166–7.

50 L. Bland, *Banishing the Beast. English Feminism and Sexual Morality, 1885–1914* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), pp. 135–9.

51 *NR*, 28 August 1870, p. 135.

52 Hennell, iii (1887), p. 307.

53 *Ibid*., p. 317.

54 *Reasoner*, 15 July 1855, pp. 121–2.

55 *Ibid*., 20 May 1855, p. 60.

56 *Ibid*., 1 July 1855, p. 108.

57 A. Besant, *The Legalisation of Female Slavery In England* (London: Besant & Bradlaugh, 1885), p. 8. First published as a series of articles in *The National Reformer*, 4 June 1876, pp. 352–3; 18 June 1876 pp. 387–8.

58 Besant, *Female Slavery*, p. 8.

59 *Ibid*., pp. 6, 2.

60 For Besant on Drysdale, see A. Besant, *The Law of Population: Its Consequences, and Its Bearing Upon Human Conduct and Morals* (London: Freethought Publishing Co., 1878[?]).

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61 Benn (1992), pp. 147–63.
62 Quoted in Bland (1995), p. 134. Bland found that 'Most feminists disagreed with Besant's "free unions"'; Bland (1995), pp. 153–4.
63 S. S. Holton, 'Free Love and Victorian Feminism: The Divers Matrimonials of Elizabeth Wolstenholme and Ben Elmy', *Victorian Studies* 37:2 (Winter 1994), 199–222, 210, 214, 205. See also S. S. Holton, *Suffrage Days. Stories from the Women's Suffrage Movement* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996). Although she did not explore this further, Holton noted that 'the secularist movement was the main inheritor of the Owenite socialist legacy, a legacy which included a questioning of traditional family forms, and more particularly, women's position in marriage'; Holton (1994), p. 205.
64 B. Caine, *English Feminism 1780–1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 96–7.
65 *Secular Chronicle* (*SC*), 31 March 1878, pp. 145–6.
66 Frost (2008), p. 195.
67 H. Quilter (ed.), *Is Marriage a Failure? The Most Important Letters on the Subject in the Daily Telegraph* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1888).
68 M. Caird, 'Marriage', *Westminster Review*, CXXX (1888), 186–201, 190–1.
69 J. Walkowitz, 'Science, Feminism and Romance: The Men and Women's Club 1885–1889', *History Workshop Journal* 21 (Spring 1986), 37–59, 44, 51–2.
70 J. Clapperton, *Scientific Meliorism and the Evolution of Happiness* (London: Kegan Paul & Co., 1885), p. 311.
71 Hennell (1887), p. 346; *The Women's Penny Paper*, 12 October 1889, p. 8.
72 Clapperton (1885), pp. 319–20.
73 A. Humpherys, 'The Journal that Did: Form and Content in *The Adult* (1897–1899), *Media History* 9:1 (2003), 63–78, 63–5. For Clapperton's ambiguous reply to an invitation to join, see *The Adult* (*Adult*), January 1898, pp. 134–5. For Vickery and Drsydale, see January 1898, p. 139.
74 *Adult*, June 1897, September 1897, January 1898.
75 *Ibid*., October 1897, p. 34.
76 *Adult*, October 1897, pp. 40–41.
77 *Ibid*., April 1898, p. 88. Northcote viewed Bradlaugh and Besant as champions of this tradition despite their personal ambivalence regarding Free Love; O. Northcote, 'Ruled by the Tomb: A Discussion of Freethought and Free Love' (Chicago: M. Harman, 1898), pp. 8–11.
78 Reported in Northcote (1898), pp. 12–13, and *Adult*, January 1898, p. 156–62.
79 Northcote (1898), p. 12. See also debate in *Free Review*, July 1896, p. 313–18, September 1896, pp. 545–9, October 1896, pp. 191–4. J. M. Robertson edited this Freethought periodical from 1893 to 1895.
80 *Adult*, January 1898, pp. 162–4.
81 For the press, see A. Humpherys, 'The Journals that Did: Writing about Sex in the late 1890s', *19 Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century,* 3 (2006) [online edition]. For this radical milieu in general, see S. Rowbotham & J. Weeks, *Socialism and the New Life: The Personal and Sexual Politics of Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis* (London: Pluto Press, 1977); S. Rowbotham, *Edward Carpenter: A Life of Liberty and Love* (London & New York: Verso, 2008). For Free Love and anarchism, see J. Greenway, 'Speaking Desire: Anarchism and Free Love as Utopian Performance

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in Fin de Siècle Britain', in L. Davis & R. Kinna (eds.), *Anarchism and Utopianism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), pp. 153–70.

82 For 'varying and contradictory' attitudes towards free unions within socialist leadership, see K. Hunt, *Equivocal Feminists: The Social Democratic Federation and the Woman Question 1884–1911* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 81–7. When Edith Lanchester was committed by her family to a lunatic asylum in 1895 for deciding to live in a free union, her release was campaigned for by the Legitimation League but not the SDF nor any prominent feminist organisation; Bland (1995), pp. 159–61.

83 *Adult*, April 1898, p. 62; *Freethinker*, 13 March 1898, pp. 163–4.

84 *The Reformer*, 15 May 1900, pp. 264–74, 15 February 1902, pp. 111–17, 15 December 1902, pp. 758–9. See also 15 December, p. 713, 15 October 1902, pp.628–33.

85 *Adult*, February 1898, p. 3.

86 *Ibid*., May 1898, pp. 93–5; *Freethinker*, 3 April 1898, p. 218.

87 *Adult*, September 1897, pp. 20–5, October 1897, pp. 40–44.

88 *Ibid*., October 1897, pp. 34–8. The more radical and potentially promiscuous Free Love could still accommodate a feminist agenda; see *Adult*, September 1897, pp. 30–32, January 1898, pp. 138–40.

89 Charles Watts in *Freethinker*, 13 March 1898, p. 163; *Adult*, April 1898, pp. 61–2. J. M. Robertson likewise reportedly held that under the present economic system which made women so vulnerable, it was not possible to do away with marriage entirely although 'this of course does not preclude the later recognition of the expediency of freedom'; Northcote (1898), p. 12.

90 This was how Foote described the approach of the Legitimation League; *Freethinker* 3 April 1898, p. 220; *Adult*, May 1898, p. 94.

91 'Fortunately, the rank and file of the movement are more logical than their leaders', George Bedborough in *Adult*, April 1898, pp. 88–9.

92 Northcote (1898), p. 20.

93 For the history of the birth control movement in Britain, see P. Fryer, *The Birth Controllers* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1965); A. McLaren, *Birth Control in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Croom Helm, 1978); H. Cook, *The Longest Revolution: English Women, Sex, and Contraception 1800–1975* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Angus McLaren noted the 'often ignored' connection between birth control and Freethought, but implied that it was relatively self-explanatory, referring simply to 'the natural interest freethinkers would have had in contraception' as a means of challenging the 'moral dictates' of the Christian Church. He did not examine further how or why Freethought ideology might have been particularly accommodating to birth control advocacy; McLaren (1978), pp. 56–7.

94 Carlile (1826), p. 102; C. Knowlton, *Fruits of Philosophy. An Essay on the Population Question. A New Edition with Notes* (London: Freethought Publishing Co., 1877) (first published 1832), pp. 5, 41–2.

95 *Reasoner* 4:91 (1848), pp. 177–79. [N.B. Copies of *The Reasoner* held in the Bishopsgate Library for 1847–48 are not individually dated, only volume and number are listed.] Martin was a close friend of birth control advocates Richard Carlile and George Jacob Holyoake and it is likely that, in the Freethought culture of free intellectual exchange between men and women, they would have discussed the issue. She was

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also committed to medical self-help, a principle that McLaren sees as central to the early birth control movement. McLaren also noted Martin's lectures and argued that 'the evidence strongly suggests that these contained birth control information'; McLaren (1978), pp. 78, 97.

96 A. Holyoake, *Large or Small Families: On Which Side Lies the Balance of Comfort*? (n.p. London, 1870), p. 1.

97 See, for example, *NR*, 19 July 1862, p. 2, 20 September 1862, pp. 1–2, 1 November 1862, pp. 1–2, 25 October 1862, p. 5, 17 October 1863, p. 7, 21 November 1863, p. 6, 12 December 1863, p. 7.

98 A. Besant & C. Bradlaugh, 'Introduction', in Knowlton (1877), pp. v–viii, vi.

99 For both Watts' and Bradlaugh's views on the matter, see *NR*, 21 January 1877, pp. 34, 42.

100 Besant & Bradlaugh (1877), p. vi.

101 For this argument, see F. H. A. Micklewright, 'The Rise and Decline of English Neo-Malthusianism', *Population Studies* 15:1 (1961), 32–51; Mason (1994), p. 208.

102 K. E. Watts, *Mrs Watts' Reply to Mr. Bradlaugh's Misrepresentations* (London: Co-operative Printing & Stationary Co., 1877[?]), pp. 5–7.

103 G. W. Foote, *Mr Bradlaugh's Trial and the Freethought Party* (London: Charles Watts, 1877[?]), pp. 1, 11, 12.

104 For the various positions of Secularist leaders regarding the Knowlton trial, see *SR*, 16 June 1877, p. 30, 23 June 1877, pp. 41, 47, 30 June 1877, pp. 58, 61, 64, 7 July 1877, pp. 65–6, 14 July 1877, pp. 85–6, 89, 91, 95. See also P. Agate, *Sexual Economy as Taught by Charles Bradlaugh MP. With Addendum by Saladin* (London: W. Stewart & Co., 1886?), p. 5 for a report of Holyoake and Law 'fudging' the issue; *SC*, 22 July 1877, p. 45, 29 July 1877, p. 58 for a report of the meeting in protest at Cleveland Hall.

105 *SC*, 22 July 1877, p. 45, 29 July 1877, p. 58.

106 Foote (1877[?]), pp. 10–11.

107 McLaren (1978), pp. 107–11.

108 See, for example, Besant's revulsion for the working-class practice of 'prolonged nursing' and her belief that if abstinence was the only solution offered to the problem of over-population this would merely result in the 'prudent' avoiding marriage while the inferior classes of society continued to reproduce with abandon; A. Besant, *Law of Population*, pp. 35, 42. For Besant's attempts to combine her support for birth control with her subsequent commitment to socialism, see M. Terrier, 'Annie Besant's Neo-Malthusianism and its Consequences for her Socialism (1877–1891)' (paper presented to the Socialist History Society, Bishopsgate Institute, London, 9 November 2011).

109 Symes was from Newcastle upon Tyne and had been a 'Wesleyan' minister before converting to Secularism, a subject upon he occasionally lectured; see *SR*, 18 March 1877, p. 55.

110 *NR*, 29 July 1877, p. 513.

111 *Ibid*., 22 April 1877, p. 251.

112 *Ibid*., 26 September 1869, pp. 196–7.

113 *Ibid*., 22 April 1877, pp. 241–48.

114 *Ibid*., 23 June 1877, p. 404.

115 *Ibid*., 23 September 1877, p. 644.

116 Carlile (1826), pp. 83, 94.

117 Drysdale (1867), p. 376.

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118 Agate, *Sexual Economy*, pp. 52, 54.
119 F. W. Newman, *The Corruption Now Called Neo-Malthusianism. Written by Request for the Moral Reform Union. With Notes by Dr. E. Blackwell* (London: The Moral Reform Union, 1889), p. 6.
120 J. A. & O. Banks, *Feminism and Family Planning in Victorian England* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1964), pp. 9–10.
121 *Ibid*., p. 92.
122 *Ibid*., pp. 92–3.
123 R. Strachey, *Millicent Garrett Fawcett* (London: John Murray, 1931), pp. 88–9.
124 Quoted in Bland (1995), p. 195.
125 Bland (1995), p. xix. See also L. Hall, 'Suffrage, Sex and Science', in M. Joannou & J. Purvis (eds.), *The Woman's Suffrage Movement: New Feminist Perspectives* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), pp. 188–200, 190.
126 McLaren (1978), p. 78.
127 For a culture of radical medical autonomy more generally, see K. Gleadle, 'The Age of Physiological Reformers: Rethinking Gender and Domesticity in the Age of Reform' in A. Burns & J. Innes (eds.), *Rethinking the Age of Reform, 1780–1850* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 200–19. It is possible that the later mainstream feminist critique of the male medical establishment and hostility to science per se also drew on this tradition. While one might see Freethought, with its celebration of the triumph and dominance of science, as the polar opposite of Frances Power Cobbe's anti-vivisection movement and attacks on 'medical materialism', in fact the two discourses may have shared intellectual origins. Feminist opposition to the male medical establishment during the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts echoed Emma Martin's critique of her exclusion as a midwife by male doctors and Harriet Law was also well known for her hostility to medical men.
128 Jackson maintains that Ellis Ethelmer, author of a number of sex education manuals, was the pen name of Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy; M. Jackson, *The* Real *Facts of Life: Feminism and the Politics of Sexuality c. 1850–1940* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1994), p. 81. Bland claims that Ben Elmy was the author, but that Wolstenholme Elmy probably helped to write them; Bland (1995), pp. 140–3. Most recently, Wolstenholme Emly's biographer has argued that Ethelmer was Ben Elmy; M. Wright, 'Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy: A Biography' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Portsmouth, 2007), p. 18.
129 Jackson (1994), pp. 81–102.
130 Bland (1995), p. 205.
131 *The Malthusian*, April 1879, p. 18; during her trial Besant also discussed the health complications caused by numerous pregnancies; *NR* 23 June 1877, p. 404.
132 R. Ledbetter, *A History of the Malthusian League, 1877–1927* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1976), p. 19. Ledbetter also notes that most initial members of the League were also members of the NSS, p. 25.
133 Benn (1992), pp. 168, 184, 199.
134 R. T. Van Arsdel, *Florence Fenwick Miller. Victorian Feminist, Journalist and Educator* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), pp. 79–80, 92–3. Fenwick Miller began lecturing unofficially for the Central Women's Suffrage Committee in 1875 and continued to lecture on suffrage after 1877, pp. 55, 93.

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135 *Ibid*., p. 190. The advertisement appeared in *The Woman's Signal* on 15 October 1896.
136 Clapperton (1885), pp. 303–4; Benn (1992), p. 184.
137 For Neo-Malthusianism, see *Reformer*, 15 October 1897, p. 232, 15 December 1897, pp. 279–81; for discussion of abortion, see 15 July 1898, pp. 117–18, 15 August 1898, p. 164–5, 15 September, pp. 197–8.
138 Alice Vickery had always felt strongly that women should take responsibility for not passing on hereditary diseases. She and Charles did not believe in restricting marriage laws or in sterilisation, preferring to educate rather than coerce the public, but they did refer to some form of state intervention (the details of which remained vague) to prevent overly large families. Bessie and Charles Vickery had a more dogmatic faith than his parents in the eugenic consequences of limiting families and their views on this subject became increasingly right wing in the twentieth century; Benn (1992), pp. 168–9, 187–8,199–200.
139 Benn (1992), pp. 186, 191.
140 *The Freewoman* (*Freewoman*), 30 November 1911, pp. 35–7.
141 *Freewoman*, 7 December 1911, pp. 51–2, 4 January 1912, pp. 132–5, 11 January 1912, p. 151, 25 January 1912, pp. 194–6.
142 Standring (the publisher of the Malthusian League's literature) wrote the handbook in collaboration with the League's Secretary William Reynolds, though the published pamphlet did not attribute authorship; Benn (1992), pp. 165–6.
143 Benn (1992), pp. 207, 166, 204–5, 213–4.
144 R. A. Soloway, *Birth Control and the Population Question in England, 1877–1930* (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill & London, 1982), esp. Chapter 5. Ledbetter noted the central role played by Secularists but did not explore the implications of their ideology for the development of the birth control movement; pp. 11, 25; Ledbetter (1976).
145 J. A. Banks, *Victorian Values: Secularism and the Size of Families* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 12–21, 22–30.
146 *Ibid*., pp. 33, 37.
147 *Adult*, January 1898, p. 173.
148 Humpherys (2003), pp. 68–70; *Adult*, August 1898, p. 191.
149 *Reformer*, 15 June 1898, p. 86.
150 Bland notes that this assertion of women's right to be sexual represented a 'radical development' from earlier feminist discussions of sex and marriage; Bland, 'Freewoman', p. 6.
151 Three out of the eight speakers advertised in the 1912 July–October programme for the Freewoman Discussion Society were directly associated with organised Freethought; *Freewoman* 27 June 1912, p. 115: Dr C. V. Drysdale, Guy Aldred, E. S. P. Haynes. For their contributions, see 14 December 1911, p. 74, 25 January 1912, pp. 186–7, 8 February 1912, pp. 236–8, 25 July 1912, pp. 189–91.
152 J. de Vries, 'More than Paradoxes to Offer. Feminism, History and Religious Cultures', in S. Morgan & J. de Vries (eds), *Women, Gender and Religious Cultures in Britain 1800–1940* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), pp. 188–210, 196. Grant Allen's New Woman novel *The Woman Who Did* (1895), for example, became famous for its depiction of free unions, featuring a heroine whose rejection of married life was inseparable from her Freethought.

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