

Dilemmas of a Liberal Descent: or, The Ladies Vanish

Writing the life of Eleanor Rathbone

The woman whose biography I am writing, Eleanor Rathbone, is best understood as a “new woman.” That is, she was one of that generation of Englishwomen who came of age in the 1890s, repudiated marriage as a prison of sexual and economic dependence, and sought to enter the worlds of work and politics as independent beings, and in their own right. Rathbone was much more successful than most: well-off from birth, she resisted her mother’s plans for a brilliant political marriage, learned Greek, went off to Somerville college to read philosophy and returned to the family home in Liverpool in 1896 to begin to accumulate her impressive record of accomplishments, leadership positions, and “firsts”: leader of the Liverpool Women’s Suffrage Society and the Liverpool women’s settlement; first woman on the Liverpool City Council, Millicent Fawcett’s successor as President of the main suffrage federation, twenty-five year architect of the successful campaign for family allowances, and, from her election in 1929 until her death in 1946, the most effective and significant woman Member of Parliament between the wars. Because Rathbone’s life was so determinedly “public,” because she had a role in almost all the major political movements and controversies of her time—from the suffrage movement to Indian constitutional reform to support for the Spanish republican cause to efforts to rescue Jews in Nazi occupied territories during the second World War—my biography is, in many ways, a “life and times”—an account of some of the great political events of the first half of our century as seen through this very brilliant “new woman’s” eye. But because it is also a biography, and

because biography arouses (quite understandably) rather mixed feelings among historians—who tend to see it as analytically unsophisticated, prone towards prurience, and (especially) too popular to be entirely respectable, I've decided to talk directly about some of the choices and problems I faced as a historian writing biography—this woman's biography.

These weren't the problems of marginalization, for whatever its standing in other historical subfields, in British history at least biography is anything but a peripheral form. Rather, as continental historians note with bewilderment and often deplore, biography is the most ubiquitous and popular genre of British historical writing. True, a voracious popular market in part accounts for biography's power: gifted non-academic writers like Miranda Seymour or Richard Holmes can easily make a living from biography, significant minor politicians like today's Roy Jenkins while away their retirements writing biography, and the lives, memoirs and diaries of even second-rank politicians find a ready market. But biography lives at the heart of the academy as well. Almost every major British historian, from John Clive and Colin Matthew to Robert Skidelsky and Jose Harris (the subjects here being Macaulay, Gladstone, Keynes and Beveridge), has also, at some point, written biography, and the profession as a whole can be pressed to collaborate on massive ventures like the rewriting of the Dictionary of National Biography. My discomfort about biography, then, was not about its place in the field.

Instead, my difficulties were a consequence of the particular kind of power biography exercises in British historical writing, of the pronounced ideological affinities of this particular form. Biography, one might say, has been the handmaiden of the whig interpretation of history; it is the form in which the liberal intelligentsia has recited its family story. The names I just

gave, of historians and of subjects, are instructive. Partly because of Britain's long history of constitutionalism, partly because its intelligentsia has always been (by continental standards) a remarkably "incorporated" one, the lives and political beliefs of earlier generations of politicians and public figures have always struck its intellectual elite as fascinating and (in a strict sense) familiar. For generations of eminent Victorians and post-Victorians, biography has served a tutelary and moral function. As Noel Annan discovered when writing his life of Leslie Stephen, that eminent Victorian and founder of the Dictionary of National Biography, biography stepped in when belief failed: biography became the form through which liberal intellectuals, having lost their religious faith, worked out an alternative credo of manliness, independence and the cultivation of "character." Reading and writing biography, generations of Britain's "great and good" have detailed the contours of the moral life.

Now, Eleanor Rathbone, my subject, seems to fit perfectly into this tradition. The daughter of William Rathbone, merchant, philanthropist and Liverpool M.P., Eleanor Rathbone was born into the liberal intelligentsia. Gladstone and Bryce, Florence Nightingale and Mrs. Fawcett, were all family friends; the leading lights of Edwardian progressivism were visitors in her home. The course of her political life—with its progression from Oxford idealism to settlement house work, from local government to Parliament—almost perfectly mirrors the trajectory followed by such male liberal luminaries as William Beveridge or Seebohm Rowntree, or of successive generations of Buxtons and Wedgwoods. Her psychic and spiritual development also sounds some familiar chords: like Leslie Stephen, Rathbone suffered from a crisis of faith; like Leslie Stephen, she wrote her way out of depression through biography (in this case, a life of her father). Indeed, so easily does Rathbone fit into the traditions of liberal

self-scrutiny that an earlier generation of memorialists unquestioningly incorporated her into that canon. The most prominent woman MP between the wars, she didn't have to wait for Colin Matthew to hunt down "missing persons" (often women) to be included in the DNB; her portrait already hung in the National Portrait Gallery when people began searching for women's faces. Within five years of her death, there was even a conventional biography—an account by a close friend that, tellingly, portrayed her as—essentially—the seventh "William Rathbone", the intellectual and activist who seized upon liberal ideals, and sought to extend them to women.

None of this is exactly false. Rathbone's life is best understood in the context of her liberal descent. She did inherit her father's mantle; and she did seek to make liberalism accommodate women's claims. And yet – the more I came in contact with this remarkable woman – and long before I decided to write her life – that framing gave me pause. It wasn't just that it tended to downplay the innovative and radical character of Rathbone's politics and thought: after all, Rathbone's effort to extend the liberal promises of citizenship and independence to women were condemned by many liberal intellectuals and politicians, who saw women's suffrage as a distraction from the more weighty business of Irish conciliation and social reform, and who feared that her proposals to "endow" mothers directly for the work of caring for children would undermine male authority within the family and disorder a labor market structured around the male family wage. Even more troublingly, that framing, I came to feel, distorted or obscured certain aspects of Rathbone's life. It was hard for me, initially, to figure out just how, and the most obvious sources weren't much help: all accounts of Rathbone's life tended to replicate this narrative, and her carefully-weeded archive supported it as well. But I began to feel, to put it most crudely, as if I were being conned. Biographers need to be

concerned about collusion with and manipulation by their subjects, however dead, and it became clear to me that just such manipulation was going on. Almost unconsciously, then, I began to listen for voices of dissent, to try to find the odd, outsider's account, to read against the grain. Those voices weren't easy to find—they silenced themselves, as often as not; they didn't want to be discovered. But, bit by bit, I began to find some other materials—evidence from wills and letters, hints of other letters now destroyed—that made it possible for me to see Rathbone's achievement of "independence" differently. I've first titled this talk "dilemmas of a liberal descent," but then retitled it "the ladies vanish," since it argues that Eleanor's "independence" was won through—and perhaps to a degree required—the erasure of three women from the story. At crucial moments, Eleanor's mother Emily, her sister Elsie, and her lifelong companion Elizabeth Macadam made choices, or even suffered defeats, that made Rathbone's achievement of liberal "independence" possible. Recovering the figures of Emily, Elsie and Elizabeth Macadam does more than just provide us with a more psychologically complex portrait of this one woman, whatever her individual significance; it can also help us to understand emotional and political dilemmas confronted by "new women" as they sought to claim the liberal inheritance – and can, by extension, help us to understand some of the ambivalences and contradictions that have plagued the history of liberalism itself.

Let me consider, then, just how Rathbone came to achieve three hallmarks of "independence" – freedom from familial dependence, financial autonomy and public voice. These three goals lay at the heart of her own political campaigns – and yet, as we shall see, her own achievement of all three was won through other women's dependence or silencing.

1. Freedom from family (the disappearance of Emily)

Let me begin, then, with a first linkage, which is between Eleanor's achievement of a most basic freedom, freedom from the demands of family, and the defeat of her mother, Emily. Like many "new women," Eleanor identified positively with spinsterhood: the spouse of her choosing was the cause of social reform. But making such a choice was not easy: for a late Victorian woman of good family to devote herself to the public good, the private first has to loosen its grip. The three Rathbone daughters were "destined to be wives": they were intended to make strategic and dynastic marriages; marriages that would provide capital for the family business and political contacts and heirs.

Eleanor's mother Emily fully intended Eleanor for such a role – which is not to say she intended her for subordination. Emily Rathbone was an educated, vigorous and intensely practical woman, active in public work, worshiped by her elderly husband and feared by her children and servants, over whom her authority was absolute. Yet Emily, like many women of her class and generation, believed that female authority must be dynastic rather than individual, used to further familial rather than personal ambitions. She did her best to force Eleanor on to this path--insisting that she conform to the rituals of her class and be presented at Court, sending her out into the marriage market of the London season. Eleanor, at twenty a dreamy rather beautiful girl with a very rich father, was an obvious "catch": how, then, did she escape this destiny?

She did it by turning to men, and especially to her father. William Rathbone was an anxious, demanding father, who subjected all of his children to intense moral scrutiny. But Eleanor was the tenth of his eleven children (by two wives), and he was, by her girlhood, already profoundly disappointed in his wastrel, dilettantish sons. William began to talk politics with his daughter, and--as Richard Potter did with Beatrice Webb--to introduce her to his important friends. Once again like Beatrice Webb, she became the protégée of one of the preeminent intellectuals of her day--in her case, Oliver Lodge then Professor of Physics at Liverpool University, and deeply involved in spiritualist experiments. Lodge, his own twelve children notwithstanding, fell a little in love with Eleanor (and, thankfully, saved her letters). A remarkable friendship ensued, with Eleanor parlaying Lodge's thinly disguised romantic interest into advice about colleges and books. By 1892, the year she turned twenty, Eleanor was studying Greek with Janet Case, who would teach Virginia Woolf Greek ten years later; she had also begun to dream of studying philosophy at Newnham College, Cambridge, founded by Lodge's friends Henry and Eleanor Sidgwick, and then much in the news as the foremost woman's college.

Eleanor's mother objected, but with her father and Lodge behind her, Eleanor was able to hold out. She WAS forced to give up the Newnham plan, but Emily--in her turn--had to agree to give Eleanor up to Somerville. Somerville was, at that point, only a hall of residence, and had not yet matched Newnham's fierce bluestocking reputation. But if Eleanor went to Somerville reluctantly and as a second-best, the choice proved a good one. The very year she went Somerville became a college; Eleanor received an excellent education. She read the classical curriculum and sat "Greats"--as Arnold Toynbee, Charles Booth, Bernard Bosanquet, H.D.

Acland, and many other prominent liberal intellectuals and social reformers had done before her -and as William Beveridge would do a few years later. The male mentors took over: Eleanor was taught by William Caird, Jowett's successor as Master of Balliol, and by a group of liberal dons deeply committed to the cause of women's education. From the students of T.H. Green Eleanor imbibed that combination of philosophical idealism and political liberalism that undergirded so many of the social reforms, of the twentieth century.

Eleanor had, then, the education of a "son", and while return to Liverpool in 1896 could have meant a return to dependent daughterhood, her father once again saved her. Impressed by her merit and deeply disappointed in his sons, William settled an independent income on Eleanor, began collaborating with her on social investigations, and eased her entry into the fiercely partisan world of Liverpool politics. And if William chose his daughter, she chose him as well: although she was more interested in women's suffrage than in dock labor, at his urging she neglected the former to devote herself to his study of the latter; during his last long illness, she acted as his secretary and scribe. By his death in 1902, when she was thirty, her mother could no longer touch her. And, if Emily had been inclined to try, two years later Eleanor cemented her position in the family by writing her father's *Life* – a remarkable biography that surveyed all six William Rathbones, but that reduced her formidable mother to a single footnote and mentioned only those brothers who were already, safely, dead.

[slides: William, Emily, Oliver Lodge, Lodge w/ family, Eleanor w/ parents]

Emily bore her defeat graciously. She came, in time, to be proud of her distinguished daughter, and the two women lived amicably at Greenbank, the rambling Rathbone family home in Liverpool, until Emily's death in 1918. Eleanor never had to be polite to a succession of presentable young men again – nor did she have to order meals, pay the servants and keep accounts. Actually, Emily never really did these things either – someone else did, the second of our vanishing women. But before I introduce you to her, and try to prevent her from disappearing down the hallway on the way to the linen closet, let me pause for a moment to ask: what did Eleanor do with her newfound freedom?

2. A Plan for women's independence

Between 1902 and 1918, a period marked by the Boer War and the death of her father on the one hand, and the First World War and the death of her mother on the other, Eleanor Rathbone worked out the political convictions that sustained her for the rest of her life. She followed her Oxford tutors' advice, and turned to civic involvement and voluntary action; like them, she found in such work both a social purpose and a balm for the soul. Unlike them, though, she worked almost entirely among women. Together with Elizabeth Macadam, a Scottish social worker who had come to Liverpool to head up the new Victoria Women's Settlement (and who became Rathbone's lifelong companion), Rathbone devoted twenty years to building up a vibrant local women's movement. That movement had many sides to it: the settlement pioneered new social services for women and children, established training programs for social workers, campaigned for women's representation on poor law boards and school committees, and, after 1909, spearheaded and sustained the local women's suffrage movement.

Rathbone herself was involved in most aspects of that work. Yet two goals in particular came to obsess her. She wished to find a means to put within ALL women's grasp both economic independence and political citizenship.

Both liberal principles and feminist convictions drove her. Liberals had always taken economic independence as the test of manliness. The ability to support oneself (and, most would have said, one's family) through labor was the crucial sign of virtue; Gladstone was not alone in thinking such capacity should serve as a threshold for citizenship. Feminists, of course, had always had difficulty extending such logic to women, but most followed Mill in condemning women's enforced dependence in marriage as morally degrading for both sexes. That women should have the ability and right to support themselves, if not that they need always do so, was, then, part of the "new woman's" creed. As, it went without saying, was suffrage. These were the twin foundations of feminism: economic independence, and the right to a public voice.

But how could women become both economically and politically independent? True to her tradition, Rathbone never saw this question in class specific terms: from the outset, she wanted to know how working-class women, and especially mothers, could share in the independence and autonomy that "new women" sought. Some twenty years of social work and social investigation followed. In pursuit of women's economic independence, Rathbone organized training and apprenticeship programs for working-class girls, unionized charwomen, and surveyed employment opportunities for women in this depressed, docks-dependent town. That work was frustrating and mostly fruitless: not only did women have few opportunities to earn, but most women were far too busy caring for children to spend their days in sweatshops

anyway. Yet the mere fact of being “fully occupied” with children was no guarantee of support: most dockers’ wives could count on only erratic support from their casually-employed husbands.

Must then these women be condemned to poverty and dependence? In the years before the war, and with Liverpool’s working mothers as her point of reference, Rathbone began to think more systematically about the problem of the lack of “fit” between a labor market and wage-system geared to compensate individual (and usually male) effort and the needs of women and children. By 1912, she had begun to raise the possibility of direct state provision for the cost of raising children, and in her political interventions she became bolder as well. In 1912, she convinced the seamen’s unions to begin paying men’s wages directly to wives; in 1914 the women’s settlement began paying pensions to widows with children directly. By the outbreak of the war, Rathbone had concluded that an economic system that treated dependent children as private goods could never offer economic equality to women: only direct socialization of the cost of children could do so. She would spend much of the next thirty years on the – ultimately successful – campaign for family allowances.

Economic independence was one goal, then, but Rathbone always saw political rights as the other side of the coin. Here again, Rathbone was influenced as much by late-Victorian radical liberalism as she was by feminism – she was always interested as much in widening the franchise as in feminizing it. For more than 20 years, then, she proved an adroit leader of the Liverpool Women’s Suffrage Society, always eschewing the kinds of media-oriented but often unpopular tactics employed by the militant WSPU and instead building up broadbased popular support through canvassing, leafleting and endless public speaking. These tactics succeeded in

bringing women onto poor law boards and school boards, and Rathbone herself became the first woman elected to the City Council in 1909. By then, however, the Liberal Party's vacillation on women's suffrage had already destroyed her party loyalties: to the disgust of the other three Rathbones on the Council (two cousins and a brother), Rathbone ran as an Independent. She represented Granby Ward in Liverpool as an independent for the next twenty-six years.

These are Rathbone's most creative years in terms of her political thought. And it is most appropriate to see her thinking in those years as a form of engagement with liberalism. What she was trying to do was to make the core principles of liberal individualism – economic independence and public voice – available to women. But if we can see this as an effort to fulfill the promise of liberalism, it is clear that it also revealed the way presumptions of women's dependence had built themselves into both the economy and politics – neither a labor market (and a trade union movement) organized around the presumption of married women's dependence, nor a political system accustomed to confer citizenship on the propertied and independent, could easily accommodate women's claims. To put this in terms Joan Scott might use, women's effort at inclusion revealed their continued identification as different – and the extent to which ostensibly universal conceptions of citizenship remained gendered. Small wonder Rathbone remained a political independent – and that other “new women” feminists followed her political lead. I don't have time to support my claims adequately here, but the one thing this biography demonstrates is the absolutely central and seriously underestimated role played by the women's suffrage question in the liberal party's demise. Most constitutionalist feminists –and there were 80,000 of these in the National Union by 1914, with a constituency organization and a war chest to rival the Conservative Party's–were by family and affiliation as

Liberals; ten years of coping with Asquith bled those women out of liberal ranks. Both sides suffered: having lost their faith in Liberalism, and with weak party ties elsewhere, activist women stood (and were defeated) in the immediate postwar elections largely as Independents; the party, having alienated some of its most faithful constituents, lost what may have been its last chance of revival.

But if this was the period of Rathbone's most creative thought, in terms of her life, it was a quiet time: she lived with Emily at Greenbank, vacationed with Elizabeth Macadam in Scotland, attended an endless round of meetings. Her national reputation was growing – she was emerging as Millicent Fawcett's successor in the suffrage hierarchy; she refused an honor for her work with soldiers' wives during the war – but she was still primarily a provincial politician. Nor is there much evidence that she had any desire to try for a national career: she kept her seat on the City Council; became deeply involved in the work of its housing committee; organized the rationalization of local voluntary organizations right after the war.

[Slides: Rathbone in Liverpool – suffrage, city councillor]

Between 1918 and 1920, however, there was a major and decisive change in Rathbone's life. One way to see that shift would be to say that she moved from theory to practice; another to say she left the provinces for the national stage. But another way to say this would be to say she became, fully, “independent” – an individual, fully possessed of a public voice. In Liverpool, she had been part of a movement – the settlement house movement, the suffrage movement – and even on the city council she saw herself as a delegate of the city's women. In these later

years, however, she became one of the great and the good – appointed as an assessor to the League of Nations in 1925, elected to Parliament in 1929 – and began to play an independent role in policymaking in a number of areas. It is for this work that she's remembered today – the successful parliamentary campaign for family allowances, the campaigns against clitoridectomy in Kenya and for a wider Indian women's franchise, her increasingly strident root and branch opposition to Chamberlain over appeasement, her painstaking work to get Republicans out of Spain, Jews out of Germany and interned aliens out of detention were all undertaken in those years, when she was in her sixties and seventies.

Now, there seems a seamless link between theory and practice, Liverpool and London, the painstaking early preparation and the later achievements. Certainly it is these years that turned her into a subject for biography, that provide us with a list of achievements we can credit to her individually. But it was at this point that I felt most acutely the dangers biography posed, and found myself trying struggling most to resist Rathbone's own efforts to dictate the terms on which her life would be written. Two documents – one will, and one short letter that entirely accidentally escape the burning intended for it – strengthened this determination, but I found those documents only because I had become mistrustful of the narrative already. As I watched Rathbone embark on a career formerly reserved for men, I found myself asking the questions Virginia Woolf thought historians should always ask, but that only women's historians and labor historians instinctively do: where did the money come from? And who was minding the house?

Rathbone had argued that women needed to be economically independent to claim their full place in public life. But, as I traced her career after 1920, it became clear to me – she was

more than economically independent, she was rich. Not that she was extravagant: good child of nonconformity that she was, she traveled second class, never spent money on herself, and once almost lost her cook when she decided the whole household should try living on the diet the British Medical Association was recommending as adequate for the unemployed. But everyone encountering Rathbone in the years between the wars knew that she was a wealthy woman, and it is important that she was: her money oiled the wheels of her many postwar campaigns; paid for her house in Westminster (soon two houses with an office round the corner), kept printing presses and pamphlets flowing; and paid the salaries of a host of cooks, maids, researchers, typists, secretaries and, later, just worthy refugees. Yet three houses, two staffs, and untold numbers of campaigns and donations later, Rathbone still left almost 100,000 pounds on her death in 1946. Clearly, becoming an “independent woman” was easier if one had money as well as brains: and where did all this money come from?

Like everyone else, I had assumed that it came from her father – but neither the figures, nor the timeframe, when I started concentrating on them, made much sense. William had made a great fortune in shipping in the 1860s and 1870s, but he left the business for politics in the 1880s and, over the next decades, gave vast sums away. William had always believed that money was a “trust,” to be used for public benefit, and he lived up to his ideals, founding Liverpool University, establishing district nursing and a charity organization society in Liverpool, endowing curates to live among the poor, and answering personally the 1000 begging letters he received during those years. He was untroubled by the idea that he might be squandering his children’s patrimony, since he thought it would be to their advantage to “have to work, as I did, for their own support.” Actually, that didn’t prove to be true: he still left a very substantial

fortune, a quarter of a million pounds, on his death in 1902. But he did, after all, have a surviving wife and eleven children, and he also left a large number of philanthropic bequests. Eleanor's share came to not much more than 10,000 pounds; by then she probably had total assets of about 20,000 (income L1,000/year). This was a considerable sum for an abstemious spinster living at home (as she then was), but not the sort of money on which one could finance the sort of political career she had after 1918. And while Emily had been left a substantial annuity, that money was for life only and only a small portion of it went, on her death to Eleanor. So where did the money come from?

This is when I began reading wills in earnest – all the wills, all 11 Rathbone children, their spouses, their uncles and aunts – and when, suddenly, another “disappearing woman” hove into view.

The money came not from William's death in 1902 but from the death of Elizabeth Lucretia Rathbone in 1920. And who was this Elizabeth Lucretia Rathbone—or Elsie? Simply, she was Eleanor's half sister—William's first daughter by his first wife. And, it turned out, she was there all along – the third Rathbone woman in the Greenbank house, living there with her stepmother and her half-sister for more than sixty years. Let me pause for a moment on Elsie, because she's someone people scarcely noticed – but she turned out to be a person of real importance. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall pointed out some years ago how the capital and labor of these forgotten middle-class spinsters sustained the “family fortunes” built up in their brothers' names – but, it turns out, sometimes they sustained their younger sisters' liberation as well. Who, then, was Elsie?

Elsie was, in a sense, the other side of Eleanor--the girl born too early, the one who lived out women's fate--before the advent of the "new woman" and William's disillusionment with his sons, came to rescue Eleanor. Elsie was William's second child, and when his first wife died, she became the surrogate mother for the rest. In the family correspondence, there are plaintive letters from Elsie to her brothers, as they are sent off to the exciting world of school, asking them not to forget her -- but they did, of course: they married, and had families; they traveled, entered business, and enjoyed themselves. Elsie stayed home. When William married again and entered Parliament, his new wife lived with him in London; Elsie was sent to run Greenbank, the Liverpool home. She was fond of her half-siblings, but her straightened life told on her: around the turn of the century when one family friend described the Rathbone daughters she thought Eleanor "very firm and Women's rightsful" while Evie looked "thin & colorless & rather ill in health, and as if she might be peevish." She looked exactly the way an fifty-year old spinster was supposed to look, and the family friend dutifully felt sorry for her.

But in 1918, now almost 70, Elsie made her will, and it was a pretty vindictive document. She had intended to leave some of her money to her own surviving brothers, but some six months later she cut them out entirely. Two of her own brothers were still alive, but one was living in indolence in a resort town in Switzerland, and the son of the other had just shocked Elsie by deserting his wife and running off with his mistress; neither seemed to be living up to the ideals William had sought to instill in them and which Elsie shared. Eleanor, by contrast, was by 1918 on the city council, running several organizations, increasingly well-known as a social reformer, and eager to enter Parliament. Looking about her, Elsie concluded that Eleanor

simply deserved the money, and when she died two years later she left the bulk of an estate valued at almost £100,000 to Eleanor, freely and absolutely.

Why did this forgotten spinster have so much money? Elsie had gotten one equal share of her mother's marriage settlement on her mother's death -- not so very much, and received a smaller share than Eleanor in William's will. But whereas her brothers' money went on London houses, continental vacations and expensive wives, Elsie's just sat there--largely in shipping shares. By 1914, more than fifty years later, those shares were worth a lot, and in the First World War they more than doubled. Elsie died in 1920, just before the wartime economic bubble burst. No doubt to the disgust of her own half-brothers, that's where Eleanor's fortune came from.

This was an unexpected discovery, but it seemed somehow fitting. William Rathbone was an important figure in Victorian politics, and when Eleanor's career took off everyone saw her as his heir. Eleanor, as I've said, colluded in this, writing her father's life and paying tribute to his example. But the money, which never lies, told a different story. Eleanor might have owed her early training and her first political opportunities to her father, but her national career became possible because one woman--this elderly, peevish and overlooked half-sister--was willing, against convention, to declare her own brothers unworthy and leave her unencumbered half-sister a fortune. The story of Eleanor's father's support is itself worth recovering, but I hope also to show the extent to which a forgotten strain of sisterly (and spinsterly) resentment and solidarity made the achievements of this one "new woman" possible.

[Slides: Elsie, Elsie w/ family]

But it wasn't just money that made Rathbone's national career possible; love also played a part. But here I found myself on even shakier ground, for here another disappearing woman rises up not in modesty but in protest and rage. Elizabeth Macadam's sacrifice, her (effective) disappearance, also made Rathbone's career possible. Rathbone and Macadam moved together to London in 1920, and – after some pretty painstaking research – it is clear to me that Macadam played an absolutely critical role in supporting Rathbone's career. But she did so with ambivalence, some bitterness, and many backwards looks, and when Rathbone died suddenly, she did her best to engineer her own disappearance from Rathbone's life. But one letter escaped the fire that destroyed – on Macadam's insistence – the rest of these two women's correspondence. What did that letter tell us?

I'm happy to read it, if anyone wants me to, but what it tells us is that it was Elizabeth who was the ambitious one, Elizabeth who wanted to move to London, Elizabeth who was drawn by the chance of a new career – and Eleanor who, putting her love for Elizabeth first, promised to follow her. Eleanor wanted to stay in Liverpool, but she would not pressure Elizabeth into staying – and so Eleanor promised, against her own preferences, to follow her. “I can be happy with you in London or in Liverpool,” Eleanor wrote, “but the first essential is that you should find yourself reaching your powers and fulfilling them.” They could, Rathbone promised, have it all – fulfilling public careers, a restful home, a warm and loving friendship – the new woman's dream.

Now, that isn't quite how it turned out. To Macadam's discomfort, Rathbone's career expanded and she was the one who found herself increasingly marginalized. The problem

wasn't simply that Rathbone became much more famous than Macadam, and hence overshadowed her; rather, the ways in which the two friends began to live worsened that problem. Macadam, remember, had run a settlement; Eleanor, her closest friends recalled, couldn't boil an egg. And so, over time, Rathbone and Macadam came to replicate conventional gender roles, with Rathbone abstracted in the world of thought, and then in the world of politics and Macadam running the house. In part, this was a matter of choice: Macadam was efficient and practical: she took pride in her managerial ability and, as she herself admitted, "liked the housekeeping." She did carry on with her work, writing (among other things) a book—*The New Philanthropy*—which remains the best account of the changing relationship between the state and voluntary welfare sectors between the wars. Yet, especially after Rathbone's election to parliament in 1929, Macadam's career took second place. As many parliamentary wives have discovered, the work of an MP is really a two-person job, and Macadam gamely shouldered her share—doing research on issues important to constituents, arranging social events, and even running Rathbone's successful election campaigns. In essence, what Macadam became was what William Rathbone's wife Emily had so successfully been: a capable political wife.

The problem was that neither Eleanor nor Elizabeth were willing to see things that way. Having dismissed wives as put-upon sexual dependents and committed themselves to a partnership based on equal and independent careers, they were incapable of acknowledging the extent to which Elizabeth had become Eleanor's "political wife." They clung to the fiction of equality, but neither the world nor their friends colluded in that fiction. Elizabeth thus found herself treated as Eleanor's companion or (worse) housekeeper—and she responded by becoming sharp-tongued and (like Elsie before her) peevish. Eleanor's friends and servants recalled

Macadam as an irritating and prickly woman, and Mary Stocks (who wrote Eleanor's first biography) rather cruelly suggested that Macadam was annoyed to be living with a woman who was much greater than she was. Only B.L. Rathbone, Eleanor's favorite nephew, came to understand that Elizabeth wasn't in fact jealous of Eleanor herself; she just resented being treated like a kind of upper servant. Nor, having devoted her life to promoting an alternative model of feminine accomplishment, did she wish to be remembered, like Emily, as a "helpmeet." Small wonder, then, that Macadam refused to play her allotted bit part gracefully, and made every effort to erase herself from the record. This obstinate Scotswoman had only a small role in the making of the British welfare state, but she had had a role, and wanted to be remembered for that alone.

[Macadam in girlhood; 1928 equal citizenship]

Conclusion:

What I've tried to do in this talk is to raise with you some of the dilemmas that I've confronted while writing the life of this extraordinary woman, and to explain some of the ways in which I've resolved them. Eleanor Rathbone – and, indeed, many of those "new women" of the nineties who became so ubiquitous in politics between the wars – owed much to her liberal descent. It is, I would argue, appropriate to see her work as an effort to complete and extend liberalism – to take the promises of inclusion and citizenship seriously for women as well as men. Her arguments for endowment of motherhood grew out of her acceptance of the importance of economic independence; her profound commitment to women's suffrage – and,

later, to colonial devolution and the defense of Spain – shows her unwavering commitment to Millian ideals of self-representation. Yet, again and again, by taking liberalism seriously, Rathbone revealed its masculine biases – she was far more loyal to liberalism than liberalism could be to her. It isn't surprising, then, that she ended up in parliament as a non-party tribune, a respected but sometimes isolated voice, a politician whose power derived—oddly—from her inability to belong.

This is the story, then, of the public life – a story of how feminism sought to complete liberalism's promise, and by doing so both vindicated and (to a degree) undermined it. But there is a private story as well, and as I've shown in runs on a parallel track. Eleanor Rathbone belonged to that first generation of "independent women" who entered politics and parliament in their own right and, essentially, as men. We've seen their entry as a victory for feminism, and so it was: Rathbone's leadership in the women's movement left her with contacts and skills that she put to good use in politics; moreover, as she found, even in parliament a kind of fragile cross-party women's alliance survived. But what I've tried to show here is how these political women, in entering this formerly male sphere, were also driven to suppress or deny female networks of love and support and present themselves, essentially, as their father's heirs. The liberal tradition offered entry to those who would be manly and independent: daughters, but not mothers, sisters or wives, could aspire to that status. In her political work—in her campaigns for endowment of motherhood and her support for a "wives'" franchise—Rathbone sought to undo just that naturalization of women's dependence, but her own life, however unwittingly, sustained it. In Rathbone's anxious emulation of her father, her repudiation of her mother, her unspoken reliance on her sister and her inadvertent derailing of Elizabeth Macadam's independent career, we see

not only the intensity of her commitment to the liberal tradition, but also the extent to which that tradition would constrain and deform those who would join it.

This is why, while I do intend to tell Rathbone's story, I won't do so quite in the way the canons of liberal biography prescribe – the way she wrote her father's story and the way she would certainly have preferred her own life to be written. Nor am I honoring Macadam's wishes; I can't leave her out. But in bringing Macadam back in—and bringing in Elsie and Emily Rathbone as well—I am driven by some of the convictions that Rathbone first brilliantly articulated about the need to make those “dependent women” publicly visible, publicly “count.” For I don't intend to show how these three women chose the lesser path, failing to achieve the full liberal self-hood that Rathbone accomplished. Instead, I hope to use their presence to reveal the hidden dependencies and contradictions that underlay that very model. Like the “public men” they emulated, this first generation of “independent women” were, in fact, embedded in networks of dependence; wives, sisters and partners supported them at every turn. Through her political campaigns, Rathbone sought to make just such private ties public, honorable and rewarded; it seems fitting, then, that her biography would do that as well – even if she did her best to stop me.

“The Letter”

March 5th, 1919

My dearest,

I am desperately anxious that you should make the right decision as to your work, unbiased by personal considerations.

But I don't want you to have wrong impressions & I thought perhaps in my anxiety to leave you free I have made you think that I am indifferent personally, as to whether you are in London or Liverpool, or rather that I think the advantage about equally balanced. This is not quite so. Provided that I felt certain that Liverpool would give you equally fair scope for your powers & therefore equal happiness and contentment in the knowledge of your usefulness, I would infinitely rather have you in Liverpool.

There is a great disadvantage in a divided life, especially as one grows older. To share a home together, to make Elsie happy and take care of her as she all her life has taken care of others, to make a center in Liverpool for all people who have wider interests than those they are surrounded by, to prove that life in the provinces could be as rich and full as life in London, to try to mould the city into new ways, to really identify ourselves with its life as some return for what it has done for me and my forebears (I see it as one-sided there)--to have peaceful weekends by sea and river--it would all be a happiness too great to seem possible. But only if it means an equal happiness for you. And it is solely because I know that you cannot just by willing it thus, make it mean that, that I want you to put this side of things behind you in making your decision & to choose the work that seems to

call you, not necessarily the loudest at the moment, but with the most permanently compelling call.

Oh my dear, my dear. If you knew how much your life, your cares, your future, your happiness meant to me at bottom, you would not think me the self-absorbed creature I seem. I can be happy with you in London or in Liverpool, but the first essential is that you should find yourself reaching your powers and fulfilling them.

Yours, ER