
Sharon Thompson, *Quiet Revolutionaries: The Married Women's Association and Family Law* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022)**Antonia Porter***

Sharon Thompson's captivating social and legal history uncovers the extent to which family law has been shaped by the work of a little-known group; the Married Women's Association. In turn, the reader also learns how the Association's work and campaign strategies were shaped by the legal processes and the social and political contexts of the time. Established in 1938 by former suffragette Dorothy Evans, the Association 'had one overriding ambition: equal partnership in marriage'.¹ The Association drew attention to the unpaid work of social reproduction; the child care and domestic labour being performed almost exclusively by women at that time. They called for recognition that wives were just as vital to the economic system of the country as their husbands and that if marriage was to be regarded as an equal partnership, then it followed that the assets and capital earned during that marriage needed to be equally owned and, on marriage breakdown, subsequently shared.

The Association is not one that has previously garnered attention. Indeed, the women's movement of the inter and post-war periods more generally has not hitherto been a focus for historians; the common trope is that the 'second-wave' of feminists in the 1960s had to *rediscover* 'The Cause'.² Thompson's wonderful exposé of the Married Women's Association is a vital part of bearing witness to women's continued organisation and campaigning between the so-called 'waves' and reframes the period more in terms of a continuity of endeavour. The prior oversight and narrative were doubtless due to the movement's less than headline-grabbing methods as compared to their suffragette and bra-burning sisters. Thompson's meticulous and riveting examination of the Association's steadfast work is a truly welcome intervention.

The book celebrates the Association's considered and tactical strategies to effect family law reform whilst being clear that their sometimes behind-the-scenes methodology did not reflect any diminished sense of urgency for The Cause. The Association worked *within* established institutional parameters to nudge the law in their preferred direction; funding a watching brief and appeal in the case of *Blackwell v Blackwell*;³ drafting the (never passed) Equal Partnership Bill; resisting the Divorce Reform Act 1969 as it passed through Parliament; entering public debate concerning maintenance (or 'wages for wives'⁴); and repeating 'unpalatable truths'⁵ to policymakers, Attorneys General and Lord Chancellors. These chosen methodologies were born of pragmatism; inching one's way to equality was

* Lecturer, Kent Law School, University of Kent, UK. Email: a.d.porter-28@kent.ac.uk

¹ Thompson, *Quiet Revolutionaries: The Married Women's Association and Family Law* (Bloomsbury, 2022) 15.

² Ray Strachey, *"The Cause": A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain* (Bell and Sons, 1928).

³ [1943] 2 All ER 579; the case is analysed in chapter 5.

⁴ Thompson (n 1) 234.

⁵ Edith Summerskill used this phrase in a speech to the Married Women's Association, House of Commons, 14 July 1960. *Oxford Essential Quotations* 4th edn, available at:

<https://oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191826719.001.0001/q-oro-ed4-00010531>

preferable to outright rejection of any proposed radical overhaul (though Thompson suggests that the Equal Partnership in Marriage Bill may have failed precisely because it *was* too radical at the time).

Nor should their more discreet methods mean that we underestimate what the Association's work can teach us about feminist activism. Too often, simply because there was no visible 'bullseye' or pivotal moment, the gains made for women's equality in marriage during this period are erroneously attributed to the 'inevitability of progress'.⁶ This book spotlights the part played by this feminist group in advancing and mainstreaming feminist reasoning in ways that may be immeasurable. For this group of intelligent, able and articulate (predominantly) women, *quiet* revolution was the most viable way they could envisage dismantling the patriarchal inheritance embedded within the law and its institutions and to effect the revolutionary and wholesale changes they desperately sought.

Thompson's project utilises archival material largely housed at the Women's Library at the London School of Economics; she references written correspondence from women to the Association, original campaign materials, the group's newsletters, reports, notes and speeches. Her sources also include key academic texts that cover the period from the Association's inception to its winding down in 1986, private records of some of the key figures in the Association, original interviews previously undertaken with members as well as primary data from interviews with family members that Thompson undertook for this project. The effect of relying on this varied source of material is to centre the voices and concerns of women and their advocates at that time. The reader is transported not only to the content but also the tone of the debate as it was being conducted. The reader's experience is immersive and the injustices facing women through the law's treatment of them becomes personal and palpable through Thompson's carefully selected extracts.

The book comprises ten substantive chapters. Chapter one traces the broader social and political contexts in which the movement was established. Chapter two points to coverture as the root that led to the undervaluing of women's domestic labour. The common law doctrine had denied women's separate legal status upon marriage and had the effect of rendering wives, *de facto*, their husband's chattels. Even after the Married Women's Property Acts (MWPAs) of the late 1800s⁷ eradicated the principle, Thompson reminds us that coverture continued to form the backdrop to married women's dependence on their husbands and their economic inequality. Whilst women being recognised as distinct legal entities represented an unambiguous advancement in women's rights, the Association had to simultaneously draw attention to the ways that a stringent application of the law with regards to separate property could lead to injustices. The chapter thus introduces the reader to the complexity of the legal status of married women, even after coverture, and how the Association had to unpick each injustice and identify their preferred strategy for legal reform.

⁶ Thompson (n 1) chapter 10.

⁷ 1870, 1882 and 1893.

Chapter three, a group biography, introduces us to how hard identifying a single preferred strategy would be for the Association. The London-based characters of the executive committee – largely middle-class, well-educated women and men – advocated on behalf of their largely working-class members in local branches. We learn of the influence and expertise that many of the committee members had; as politicians,⁸ through their practice as professional lawyers,⁹ as experienced feminist activists¹⁰ and as well-known writers and philosophers.¹¹ The group biography reveals the broad church of personalities that the Association accommodated and thus the reasons behind some of the strategic tensions that subsequently emerged. The split of Helena Normanton (Britain's first female barrister) from the group in 1953, discussed in chapter six, is indicative. This rupture and Normanton's competing representations to the Royal Commission on Marriage and Divorce had the effect of undermining the demands of the Association. Normanton considered the Association's demands for 'the pooling of respective incomes [in marriage], the sharing of any surplus income and savings and full financial disclosure of all assets' to be unreasonable expectations and instead advocated for paying wives a wage for domestic labour from the employed spouse's salary.¹²

Chapter four explores the Association's peaceable (if ultimately unsuccessful) pursuit of an Equal Partnership Act. The Bill sought equal division of household income and rights to the matrimonial home. Whilst acknowledging the limits of law's power to effect gender equality, especially given law's questionable claims to neutrality, the Association still advocated for the Bill for some four decades. Thompson rightly argues that the importance of this campaign should be measured in terms of the 'patchwork of reforms' that followed the Bill's ultimate failure. In this way, we appreciate that the value of activism may not be demonstrable in radical ideological and legal victories but in piecemeal, perhaps less concrete, advances brought about by 'persistent'¹³ pressure.

This is a theme that is picked up in chapters seven (One Step at a Time), eight (Resistance as a Reform Strategy) and nine (Two Steps Forward, One Step Back). In chapter seven, the technique of taking an incremental approach to family law reform is explored. The technique became deliberate in the Association's third decade when it chose to 'lop a branch or two from the tree' as opposed to 'target[ing] the roots of inequality in marriage'.¹⁴ The Association found that the Private Member's Bill procedure was an effective way of ushering in change in the face of a government who were too scared to raise the issue themselves, lest they jeopardise the male vote. In chapter eight we learn how the Association's act of

⁸ Dr Edith Summerskill was the first President of the Association in 1941; a medical doctor and Member of Parliament.

⁹ Founding members included Ambrose Applbe, a male solicitor; barristers Helena Normanton, Betty Knightly and Roxane Arnold; and legal academic Olive Stone.

¹⁰ Feminist campaigner, Teresa Billington-Greig became vice-president.

¹¹ Author, Vera Brittain; and political and philosophical writer Dora Russell both added prestige and prominence to the Association.

¹² Thompson (n 1) 140.

¹³ MWA Annual General Report 1970-72, 5SPG/M10, TWL.

¹⁴ Thompson (n 1) 161.

resisting and slowing the proposed Divorce Reform Act 1969 sparked important debate about the monetary value of reproductive labour. The subsequent Matrimonial Proceedings and Property Act 1970 finally ensured that non-financial contributions to family life were recognised in legislation, and yet, despite this landmark moment, chapter nine reveals how the Association's ongoing demands for wives' equal rights to the matrimonial home continued to face significant opposition. These final chapters are realistic about the extent to which the Association could effect legislative change, but the message Thompson seeks to convey comes through loud and clear: that sometimes what ricochets from apparent failure is, nonetheless, progress and that measuring success in terms of piecemeal amendments and gradual shifts in public perception means that we do not erase the invaluable work of groups like the Married Women's Association.

In between substantive chapters, the book also includes a number of what the author calls 'interludes'. These interludes (1-2 pages in length) break up the chronological narrative of the substantive chapters and serve to spotlight a particular treasure that Thompson has uncovered from her archival research. Breaking up the traditional chapter structure of the book also serves to remind the reader that the Association was working in multi-faceted ways; the group were frequently agile and intuitive in responding to both the extant structural and legal barriers and the influential personalities that could hinder (or advance) their progress.

The interlude about founder Juanita Frances offers insight into her vivacious, instinctive and determined passion for The Cause. It also captures how she was recruited, embraced and trained up and the part played by informal networks and serendipitous opportunities. A second interlude about Lord Denning cautions that whilst his legal judgments acknowledged the injustice wives faced due to the prohibition on their ownership of housekeeping savings and his desire to favour deserted wives' property rights, in actual fact, his personal views were regressive. He publicly voiced the notion that the wife was the 'spoilt darling of the law'¹⁵ and that in fact equality had been achieved for her (with the erroneous effect, says Thompson, that one was left thinking that no more needed to be done for women). A further interlude sets out the speech of Vice President Theresa Billingham-Greig when celebrating 21 years of the Association's existence. The speech is a consummate example of the Association's incisive invocation of language to highlight women's injustices; Billingham-Greig uses metaphor to communicate both the Association's reform strategies together with critique of the structural inequalities baked into the law:

Reform movements are like builders; they set out to erect structures in which human beings can live better lives but there are few of them which can begin their constructive work at once because of the state of the site on which they have to build.¹⁶

¹⁵ As reported in Anon, 'Cost of Sex Equality', *The Times* (13 May 1950) 3.

¹⁶ Speech of Teresa Billingham-Greig, MWA Newsletter, June 1958, 7TBG/2/J/08, TWL.

A final interlude reveals an exchange in the Daily Mail newspaper in 1978 in which the Association responds in wonderfully parodic fashion to the headline, 'Why I think men get a rotten deal over divorce by Reggie.' Repeatedly offering pity to the complainant by referring to him as 'Poor Reggie', their letter to the editor epitomises their *modus operandi*; they play at smoothing ruffled feathers while pointing out Reggie's misplaced claims about the unfairness of divorce maintenance payments.

Quiet Revolutionaries is a must-read for all scholars of feminist legal history, and its accompanying podcast further brings the group's exertions to life. Thompson's work fills a crucial gap in our understanding about how women organised and sought legal reform to advance women's equality in marriage between the so-called first and second waves of feminism. It also teaches us that legal reform is rarely achieved linearly and that progress can be measured in both the ebb and flow of concerted strategic endeavour.