

8. Women

Birds in freedom, not cages; beasts, not of the zoo or working for wages.

Rose Scott (1847-1925).

The earliest known female vegetarian was probably the doctor, spiritualist and feminist Harriet Clisby (1830-1931) who arrived in Australia in 1838. Her vegetarianism stemmed from her and her family's belief in spiritualism and their membership of the Swedenborg New Church.

Clisby, who was interested in modern developments in science and the arts and was dissatisfied with the choices open to women, published the first Australian magazine by and for women in the early 1860s. Deciding she would like to become a doctor, something that was not possible as a woman to do in Australia, she left for London, finding it also difficult there she eventually took up medical training in America, qualifying in 1865. In America, she made contact with other vegetarians such as the Alcott family. It was with the author Louisa May Alcott that she founded in 1877 the Women's Educational and Industrial Union.

The leadership of the Victorian-based Australian Vegetarian Society of 1886 was initially predominately made up of men, albeit men who actively supported women's suffrage and rights. Although women at the outset seemingly did not choose to take up leadership positions (excepting for Fanny Samuels who was the first vice-President), female members were always active and prominent. By 1890 however, the Society had an equal number of men and women as office holders. These included Ellen Harvie, who became vice-president at the instigation of the membership who deliberately sought to maintain a woman in this role.¹ Harvie who ran the first vegetarian restaurant and catered for the Society's meetings, later also became the Society's secretary. Miss Fanny E. Samuel - described as a 'clever and active blind young lady' - was an active participant in many progressive movements from the time of her arrival in Australia in 1882 until her return to England in 1894. Born in America of Polish parents, she was raised in New York and London, but it was in Australia that she became an active spiritualist and

¹ Annual Report of the Vegetarian Society of Australia, Vegetarian Messenger, 1890, page 264

vegetarian. Samuels was an accomplished singer and made her living as a singing teacher. She gave lectures for the Vegetarian Society on aspects of diet and using her musical skills provided the entertainments at their meetings. Another woman Miss E A Jones was the Society's membership secretary in the 1890s while, from the early 1900s, the Honorary Secretary of the Society was Mrs Annie MacDonald (nee Lowe), a poet and successful propagandist for the cause.

Outside of the vegetarian organisations many women sought to create their own separate forums for change and action. Frances Levvy started the Women's Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the first Australian branch of the British Christian organisation, The Band of Mercy, to achieve her goals rather than join with men in like pursuits. The Band of Mercy's purpose was to teach children to be kind and respectful of all animals. Children joined by making the declaration:

We agree to do all in our power to protect animals from cruel usage, and to promote as far as we can their humane treatment.

The organisation's publication, *The Band of Mercy Advocate* - published by Levvy and Mrs J. C. Ellis from 1887 - was full of uplifting short stories, poems and moral lessons concerning animals. There was rarely a mention of men apart from descriptions of male brutality.

Another women's organisation - the WCTU - allowed women to promote vegetarianism to women as an acceptable and normal diet.

Within organisations not overly concerned with animal welfare or dietary reform - such as the Australian suffragette or feminist movement - many of the leading figures would certainly have known, if not approved, of the diet, including Alice Henry, Miles Franklin, Rose Scott and Maybanke Anderson. No biographer, however, has recorded the diet of these prominent Australian women and their correspondence gives little indication. However, being involved in reform movements usually meant working and socialising with many vegetarians. Franklin, in particular, who was known to like some animals better than many people (and who lived for a time with a monkey), worked and lived with vegetarians both in the United States and in Britain. She also wrote approvingly of the dietary practices of overseas vegetarians such as Charlotte Despard, and in 1916 before setting out to work as a cook for a military hospital in Macedonia during WW1 learnt some basic catering skills by working at the vegetarian Minerva Café run by the Women's Freedom League in London.

The West Australian, Bessie Rischbieth - probably the most prominent feminist in Australia between the wars - founded and led many women's emancipationist organisations and charitable bodies. She was also deeply interested in Theosophy and other Eastern religions that led her to

travel to India and, at one point, to stay at an *ashram* with Mohandas Gandhi. This experience may have been responsible for converting her to vegetarianism. Rischbieth was certainly vegetarian in later life, even though the limited references to her dietary habits only talk of her “Spartan diet”. The word ‘Spartan’ was quite often used as a synonym for vegetarian because the ancient Spartans were known for their limited but healthy diet which many have thought to have been also vegetarian. Rischbieth’s vegetarianism, therefore, was not overt and neither was her promotion of the diet in the journal she founded and edited entitled, *The Dawn* (1918-1967).

During the 1920s every issue of *The Dawn* contained vegetarian recipes, with only a couple of the recipes published containing recipes for meals with meat. It preferred to promote nut loaves, salads and (Child Study) milk. The journal also very frequently suggested to its readers the benefits of grains, lentils and vegetables in their diet - especially for the young - although it always stopped short of openly advocating vegetarianism.

Sydney socialite, Rose Scott, was not only a leading campaigner for the rights of women and the protection of children; she was also famous for her love of birds and was an early campaigner for their legal protection and preservation. While it is not known if she was a vegetarian, she is reported to have said, “We will one day think it is as horrible to eat animals as we now think it horrible to eat each other.”

A suffragist who was clearly and publicly vegetarian was Henrietta Dugdale (also known as Harriet Dugdale, and later as Mrs Dugdale Johnson). Dugdale’s vegetarianism was based on her wide compassion for all living things and is in many ways close to the modern concept of ethical vegetarianism. Unlike most vegetarians of her day, she was certainly not a vegetarian because of her religious affiliations - in fact she believed that religion was, ‘despotism formed by man to humble women.’

Dugdale was the first president of the Victorian Women’s Suffrage Society (1884) and was a strong advocate of feminism, rationalism and vegetarianism. She has been credited with making the first public feminist statement in 1869 by having a letter published in the *Argus* newspaper advocating female enfranchisement. Dugdale was also a member (together with W. H. Terry and Alfred Deakin) of the Eclectic Association founded to discuss advanced theories in a sensible and gender neutral forum.

Dugdale was in advance of most of her peers in many respects. She made her own clothes in the style of the leading American dress reformer, Amelia Bloomer. She also built her own furniture and grew her own food which, as a vegetarian, may well have been a necessity given the paucity of food choices available at the time. Her independent and robust lifestyle obviously had a lot to recommend it as she lived to a ripe old age, outliving two of her three husbands.



In her one novel, *A Few Hours in a Far-Off Age* (1883) - a utopian tale set in the far distant future of 2881 (the reverse of 1882 the year of writing) - her political concerns were given full voice. In her future society (much to her literary protagonist's joy) there are no animals used or abused for transport. In fact the society is a totally vegan one, where neither meat nor other animal by-products such as leather are used at all.

Though not a Christian, Dugdale was still a temperance supporter and, like them, believed that a meat diet contributed to moral laxness in other areas. She had a great hatred of violence shown towards any creature. Although thrice married, newspaper reports suggested that she was a lesbian because of her 'mannish' dress, short hair and close female friendships. Whatever her sexuality, the men of her future society were more advanced, thinner, graceful, articulate and decidedly more effeminate. Men would no longer be the meat-eating warriors of her day:

"In those sadly ignorant old times, men, and many other vindictive animals, devoured flesh. It is easy to understand how such a primeval diet would tend to the conservation of blood-thirsty instincts."²

Meat - particularly red meat - has long been identified in both traditional and Western societies as a 'masculine' food and advertising of it is often still aimed at the male market. In some cultures this idea was taken to extremes so that meat was only allowed to be consumed by men. Dugdale was not alone in her view of meat's role in maintaining primitive habits. Many feminist women first started making links between patriarchy and a meat diet in Europe and America in the Victorian era when - in their eyes - meat-eating became less associated with the virtues of virility, wealth and power and more linked to vices such as violence, cruelty, gluttony and drunkenness.

Were she alive today, Dugdale would probably be bitterly disappointed in the progress of vegetarianism in Australia as she would have expected it to have been the dominant diet. With

² Dugdale, Henrietta, *A Few Hours in a Far-Off Age*, Melbourne, McCarron Bird, 1883, p.91

support for the diet seemingly growing all around her during her lifetime, she predicted that a purely vegetarian society would soon emerge. In the late 1870s she wrote that Australians were “fast abandoning flesh diet for one of pulse, green and fruit.”³

The novel, *A Women's Friendship* - written by Ada Cambridge during Dugdale's time - contained a character that is believed to have been modelled on her.⁴ Relating to many of the issues on which she campaigned, the novel was first serialised in *The Age* newspaper in 1889 and tells the story of a friendship between two middle class ladies - Mrs Patty Kinnaird, who represents traditional Australia, and a Mrs Margaret Clive whose “sympathies were wide, embracing every form of disreputable opinion.”⁵

The story is set in Melbourne and takes place against the backdrop of the Centennial International Exhibition of 1888-1889. This huge exhibition - held to mark the centenary of Australia's settlement - was a major landmark for the city. It featured a great array of cultural and scientific items from the different states, as well as from most European countries and the Americas. Unfortunately, the newly-established Vegetarian Society, which requested a stall, was not permitted to take part in the festivities.

The novel uses the relationship between these two women - and a third male character that comes between them - to overtly debate the issues of the day, such as feminism and social equality. Like Dugdale, Mrs Clive is an advocate of dress reform, feminism, universal suffrage and (naturally) vegetarianism.

“The appointments of the table, though simple, were dainty, like everything that appeared to Margaret, but there was no luxury in the matter of food. Plain living and high thinking was the maxim of that household. A concession was made to the course appetites of men in the shape of a broiled beefsteak and bottled ale, but mother and daughters kept to a lenten diet, disliking the former on principle, the latter from habit, what Margaret shudderingly termed ‘flesh’, as if to like it were a sort of cannibalism. Patty was still partial to a savoury dish - she had not reached the point of feeling that anything impure or gross was involved in eating a dead body purveyed by

3 Dugdale, Henrietta, *A Few Hours in a Far-Off Age*, Melbourne, McCarron Bird, 1883, pp.97-98

4 Morrison believes that the description of Mrs Clive's dress has a likeness to Dugdale in Cambridge, Ada, *A woman's friendship*, edited by Elizabeth Morrison, Kensington, N.S.W. , New South Wales University Press, c1988, p.126

5 Cambridge, Ada, *A woman's friendship*, edited by Elizabeth Morrison, Kensington, N.S.W. , New South Wales University Press, c1988, p.6

the butcher - and as an accomplished bush cook it was difficult to reconcile herself to Margaret's ideal bill of fare; nevertheless she made a substantial meal of bread and butter and strawberry jam, and greatly enjoyed the feast of reason that she simultaneously partook of.”⁶

Cambridge's novels of colonial Victoria are reasonably accurate depictions of the era. The character of Mrs Clive also seems to be an accurate portrait of 'advanced' women of the time. She is an intelligent, middle class woman constrained by her social position and sex, though happily married to a generally supportive husband who is the editor of a newspaper. Clive is clearly the heroine of the book and, while the author may poke gentle fun at her aspirations, habits and reformed modern dress, she is still always depicted as holding these “disreputable opinions” with intelligence, integrity and courage.

There were many writers, such as Henrietta Dugdale and HG Wells' (see *A Modern Utopia*, 1905) who saw vegetarianism gaining wider support in the future. One of them was the South Australian, Catherine Helen Spence (1825-1910). Apart from being a journalist and wide-ranging social reformer on behalf of children, the poor and the mentally ill, Spence also wrote a number of novels in which she raised her concerns. Her novel, *A Week in the Future*, was first serialised in Sydney's *Centennial Magazine* in 1889. In it, the protagonist is transported from 1888 to 1988 and foresees a future in which many of the problems facing society - and especially women - have been solved. Women would have property rights, could vote and hold high office, while female clothing would be less restrictive and health greatly improved. The growth of the vegetarian diet would also be evident, as she describes a meal eaten a century hence:

“The food was abundant and excellently cooked and served, but there was far less meat on the table than I was accustomed to see. Three of the families were absolutely vegetarians, but, independent of that, vegetable diet took a much greater place in the food of the people now that all classes lived alike... Soups made largely from pulses, a profusion of vegetables - some familiar to me, but others quite new, salads, light puddings and pastry, and a large quantity of fruit - raw and cooked, with white and brown bread *à discretion* made up the dinner, which I enjoyed very much.”

⁶ Cambridge, Ada, *A woman's friendship*, edited by Elizabeth Morrison, Kensington, N.S.W. , New South Wales University Press, c1988, p.47