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Exploring a rational approach to knowledge and life

Henrietta Dugdale – Freethinker and Suffragist

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This synopsis tracks the story of Henrietta Dugdale, a leading light of the women's liberation movement in pre-Federation Australia. Throughout the nineteenth century, women were treated as emotional and fragile, unable to govern themselves. In this social setting, Dugdale challenged the suffocating patriarchal structures of the day with her provocative prose and political willpower. She campaigned tirelessly for equality and for the victory of reason over cruel religious dogma. With her fellow suffragists, she changed irrevocably how women were treated within the family and the broader society.

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1. A Rebel with Many Causes

Henrietta Dugdale was a trailblazing humanist freethinker who set the course for the emancipation of women in Australia. She was born Henrietta Worrell in London on the 14th May 1827, and from an early age involved herself in social justice causes. In 1852, she sailed to Australia with her merchant navy officer husband, J. A. Davies. After her husband died, she married William Dugdale and moved to Queenscliff in the south of Victoria.

Her rise to prominence began on the 13th April 1869, with the publication of her objection to the piecemeal Married Women's Property Bill that still left many women destitute after their husband's desertion. Writing under a pseudonym to Melbourne's *Argus* [1869] newspaper, she implored, 'This is a piece of the grossest injustice, and being unjust the consequences can only be evil.' The flaming passion in her voice set the tone for her approach for the rest of her public life.

Over many years, Dugdale campaigned for a variety of women's causes. In pre-nineteenth century Australia, woman's attire, such as binding corsets, was physically debilitating. So, she found campaigning for women's dress reform natural. She also fought for the admission of women to the universities and for the education of the working class. Dugdale wanted for women the same social, legal and political privileges that men enjoyed. On economic rights, she campaigned for a more equal distribution of wealth and for an eight-hour work day.

2. A Suffragist Manifesto

Dugdale joined the Eclectic Society and became an active member of the Australasian Secular Association, an organization working to counter religious privilege and intolerance. In 1883, she published her manifesto, [*A Few Hours in a Far-Off Age*](#), dedicating it to George Higinbotham, a pro-suffrage parliamentarian. In her book, Dugdale reviewed the history of humankind from its ignorant and patriarchal past to an imagined future in which women are granted equal power in political governance and full autonomy in how they run their own lives.

She believed that women were kept in positions of servitude and distracted by trivial pursuits for the purpose of continuing male domination. This repression was perpetrated and perpetuated by the religious 'myth-men' arrogantly claiming that the deity made man in his image and that women 'had been the primary cause of every wrong-doing, for which she had been doomed to suffer cruel punishment and be subservient to man through all earthly life' [Dugdale 1883: 11]. Dugdale [1883: 17] rejected the God of the holy books as 'as an avenging deity of an exceedingly vain and cruel nature'. She saw religious dogmas as part of an earlier, primitive time in humankind's evolution and for which civilized humans would have no use in the future: 'Arouse cowards, whose growing reason has taught them disbelief in creeds—which sufficed well enough for humankind when its nature was little higher than that of the ape' [1883: 103].

On morality, she described herself as a believer in ‘true ethics’ [1883: 26], free of religious dogma and intolerance and based on equality, justice and universal benevolence. Dugdale [1883: 12] saw the institution of marriage in her day as condemning wives to ‘menial work’ so severe that she often died and in which the husband rapidly ‘squandered his wife’s property’. The ideal marriage, she countenanced, ‘can spring only from the mutual respect of one equal for another in that life-long bond. . . . For noble happiness to exist between wife and husband, there must be perfect equality of world power.’ [1883: 66]

For Dugdale [1883: 15], ‘humankind is still progressing’ from its superstitious and barbaric past. In the future world, there will be neither war nor subjugation of other peoples [1883: ch. 18]. She gave hope to the utopian ideal of the perfectibility of humankind, which she saw as the lesson to be drawn from the science of evolution. Human beings are part of the natural order of the world, she thought.

Dugdale fervently believed that science and the advancement of scientific knowledge are critical to both the ongoing advancement of humankind and the end of the repression of women and of the poor. ‘Education, bringing its refinement into the mind as surely to be reflected in speech and actions, is the true and certain leveller’ [1883: 87], she wrote. Dugdale encouraged learning in the ways of philosophy and of science, especially the new science of evolutionary studies [1883: 34]. In this enterprise of knowledge building, Dugdale [1883: 32f] envisaged ‘that our Australia planted the seed of so goodly a tree of knowledge’. She longed for the day when people of whatever sex and from whatever class they came from could realize their full intellectual and social potential; a goal central in the humanist worldview.

Also fundamental to her humanist and freethinker outlook was the role that reason played in her philosophy. In her book [1883: 99], she looked back on that pivotal time in human history when ‘those pitiable barbarians had begun to claim the right of their own minds to think for themselves [and] how long it took before they succeeded in quite disentangling themselves from the chains of superstition’. Dugdale ends her utopian story with a strong note of optimism: ‘Dream, or what else it has been, I see always the beautiful light bright with truth and hope. No one can extinguish it!’ [1883: 105]

3. Universal Suffrage Triumphant

During the late nineteenth century, gaining the right of women to vote was a key ideal for the suffragists. On the 7th May 1884, Dugdale founded the Victorian Women’s Suffrage Society with Annie Lowe. Dugdale chaired the inaugural meeting and became the Society’s first President. This was the first women’s suffrage society formed in Australasia. Dugdale and her fellow suffragists campaigned relentlessly for political representation through organizing public meetings and debates, publishing leaflets, writing letters and lobbying members of parliament.

Dugdale’s tireless struggle for women’s suffrage finally paid off. In June 1902 and at the age of 75, she witnessed women gaining the right to vote and the right to stand for federal parliament. Australia became the first country in the world to allow women to sit in

parliament. On the 17th June 1918, at the age 91, she died, leaving behind three sons and a much more egalitarian Australia.

Dugdale was a pioneer in the women's suffrage movement. Her humanistic values of inclusion and equality for all and her deep lament at the suffering of others propelled her to change the lives of others through social action. 'Show them good, and awaken reverence for good by your own acts' [1883: 54] was her motto. In gratitude, her name is lent to a street in Canberra and to the Dugdale Trust for Women and Girls, a national harm-prevention institution [Wikipedia contributors 2017].

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