

Chapter 4. SOCIAL ACTIVISM -- SEEING FOR ONESELF

One of the most poignant ways for affluent people to be jolted into social activism was by seeing children who lived in abject poverty. **Mary Carpenter** (1807-1877) was born into a prominent English Unitarian family which believed whole-heartedly in education. When she was 22, she and her mother opened a girls' boarding school in Bristol; it was for those whose parents could pay, not for the desperately poor (Manton, 1976). In 1834, Carpenter met Dr Joseph Tuckerman, a Unitarian minister from Boston who visited her family. Tuckerman was single-minded in his desire to help even the most destitute, all children of God. One day, the two walked through a Bristol slum. The open space among the decrepit buildings swarmed with children hunting through garbage for something to eat, or playing in the gutter. Suddenly a ragged boy dashed out of a dark entryway and across their path. Tuckerman watched the child with anxious eyes. **"That child should be followed to his home and seen after," he said.** "His words sank into my heart," Mary recalled. Thirty-five years later, she still remembered that moment as the great turning point in her life. Although she desperately wanted to marry and have children, she felt herself to be too plain and irritable for this happiness. She would transfer her stifled feelings "to children in need, rejected by society and cast aside in life for an ugliness not of their making. She would fight for neglected children with a fierce tenacity and resentment she had never shown in her own cause." Carpenter founded a school for the poor in a Bristol slum which was to become the first of the wide-spread Ragged Schools; these schools enabled children living in poverty to obtain a free rudimentary education, something that had never before been available. Later, she founded a reformatory for boys and a school for Hindu girls.

Carpenter remained susceptible to religious men. Nine years after she had been inspired by the words of Dr Tuckerman, she was similarly jolted by those of the Rev Dr Dewey of New York. He and other visiting American ministers had talked to her about the movement to abolish slavery in the United States. **The Rev Dr Dewey of New York was the man who inspired her in 1843 to become involved because of his passionate command "Do something!"** (Carpenter, 1879, 89). She immediately asked what should be done, and then followed through, giving contributions to the cause of abolition in America. Each Christmas she organized a Christmas box full of gifts to be sent to the Abolition Fair in Boston. Even her mother's housemaids knitted and crocheted articles for the cause (Manton, 1976, 76).

Annie Macpherson (b1842) became a social activist for the same reason as Carpenter; she too was jolted at actually seeing the incredible poverty suffered by some children in prosperous London (Bagnell, 1980). While she was growing up in Glasgow, one of seven children and two foster-children, she converted to evangelical Christianity. She decided to go to London to help the poor in the city's East End. One evening in 1867, she and another woman working with her in the slum area of Bethnal Green climbed up to the sweltering attic of an old house. Bagnell writes: **"Inside was a sight that would move her to direct the rest of her life, not to the miseries of poverty in**

general, but to the suffering of children. Everywhere in the attic, beneath the rafters and in the dusty corners where shafts of light fell through cracks in the roof, crouched more than 30 small girls, their arms thin as broomsticks, at work making matchboxes."

As Macpherson climbed down again through the attic hatch she decided that she must immediately help these desperate girls. She rented a nearby empty warehouse to create the Home of Industry where needy children would work but also receive food, education and some free time. She was able to help hundreds and then thousands of young children, so many that she soon organized Homes in Canada where children could be sent as immigrants first to work in Canadian homes and on farms, and then as adults to settle permanently. Her work would influence Dr Barnardo to do the same. She made a profound difference not only to the lives of thousands of children throughout Britain, but also to the population of Canada.

Thomas Barnardo (1845-1905) was equally as anxious as Carpenter and Macpherson to improve the lives of desperately poor English children. He grew up in Dublin where he was converted by his brothers when 17 to an ardent and activist Christianity (Bagnell, 1980). He decided to enroll in medical school in London to prepare himself for mission work in China. However, part way through his training, he was judged to be unsuitable to be a missionary and he dropped from the program, deeply disappointed. He continued to preach about Christianity, however, and to help children who were in need. He converted an old donkey stable to a place where children could come to learn about the Bible. One of these boys, Jim Jarvis, barefoot and ragged, didn't want to leave when a session ended one evening; he said he had no home to go to, to Barnardo's surprise. Jim Jarvis said that he would show him other children who were also alone in the world. He led Barnardo to Petticoat Lane, then shinnied up the wall of a shed to the roof with Barnardo following him. Barnardo wrote, "With their heads upon the higher part of the roof and their feet somewhat in the gutter, but in a great variety of postures, lay **eleven boys huddled together for warmth-- no roof or covering of any kind was over them and the clothes they had were rags** which seemed worse than Jim's."

That night, Barnardo resolved to forget about China and concentrate his considerable energies on the destitute children around him. Soon he began opening up refuge homes for boys and later girls, and eventually organized their emigration to better lives in Canada. Bagnell writes that Barnardo's new direction in life would "change the destiny of hundreds of thousands of British children and, in doing so, have a deep and complex influence on the life of Canada for a full century."

Margaret McDougall (1826-1898) was brought up in the north of Ireland among wealthy and staunch conservatives before emigrating to Canada (McDougall, 1882, 297-8). She was taught, and believed, that in Ireland "landlords were lords and leaders, benefactors and protectors to their tenants." When she took a trip back to her homeland about 1880, however, she was jolted by what she found. She understood enough Gaelic to realize from conversations she took part in or overheard that the existing system of land tenure was at the bottom of the extreme poverty she saw: "**I met with testimony everywhere of how often and how fatally the will of a lord**

interfered to prevent prosperity". From having been unaware of any problem at all to do with land tenure, she now urged that Britain use a policy of conciliation rather than coercion in Ireland.

Her observations about Ireland from her trip were written in many letters home. When she herself returned to Canada, she helped organize 74 subscribers to give money so that her letters could be published in book form and her ideas widely disseminated. (Despite the spirit this action would have demanded, her name does not appear on the title page of the book, presumably an act of humility that befitted a woman author at that time). McDougall remained so charged up about the wrongs she had seen that she immediately wrote a novel based in Ireland and the then current unrest concerning Home Rule (*The Days of a Life*, 1883).

In the United States, and much later, **Virginia Foster Durr** (b1909) was jolted by the dreadful lives of American poor (Durr, 1987). She was born to a wealthy family in Alabama, and raised with southern sensibilities. When she went to Wellesley College for her sophomore year she was horrified to find that a Black student was sitting at her table. She said her father would die of shame if he knew of this. "My God, I nearly fell over dead. I couldn't believe it. I just absolutely couldn't believe it," she wrote. She marched out of the dining room to complain to the head of the house, but this woman was unimpressed with her attitude. She said that Foster could either obey Wellesley's rules or leave the college. Foster decided to stay, but she never told her father about such incidents.

Foster's "real liberation" came after her marriage, while she was in hospital following a miscarriage. She chatted with a young woman from Chicago who had travelled alone to Birmingham to give birth and then surrender her baby for adoption. She was afraid to see her child after it was born in case she fell in love with it. Durr thought about her own birthing experience, surrounded by flowers, nurses, and family who loved her, and compared it to that of this woman who had no one she knew nearby and no baby either. The woman's suffering affected Durr strongly; **she realized "how badly women could be treated and how helpless they were..."** I think that was the first dawn of a feeling of wrath and rage against women's lot". Durr never forgot this woman. She soon dedicated her life to working for social change for Blacks, for women, and for those in poverty. She of necessity became politicized, working endlessly to defeat the poll tax and provide civil rights to southern Blacks.

Author **Louise Kehoe's** mother was similarly born with a concern about class structure. Her father was wealthy but mean-- when he visited his London club he would hand his coat to his chauffeur to deposit with the pawnbroker around the corner (Kehoe, 1995, 12-15). He knew that he could retrieve it the same day without cost, while if he left it at the club's cloakroom, he would have to tip the attendant. Kehoe's mother was told by her mother that "Servants are not like us; people from the lower classes cannot think or feel as we do. They are born to serve as we are born to lead, and they are perfectly content with their lot." Kehoe's mother was still unconvinced by this argument, however, and spent much time talking to the servants. This was in the 1920s when there was massive unemployment in England and widespread poverty. She watched the

parlourmaid sneak a weekly treat of a slab of bread soaked in roast dripping to her little boy. When she asked the boy why he went barefoot in winter, he said that he had no shoes. This answer horrified her, just as did the images of the hopeless, hungry people in the streets. "She became a communist in her heart long before she had ever heard of Marx or Engels, and although she very quickly learned to dress her burgeoning social conscience in the drab and leaden language of dialectical materialism, she never lost the anger and the passion that had first goaded her into political awareness."

Patwant Singh is an Indian who until middle age refused to admit "that *poverty* was a word to be applied to India" (Woodcock, 1994, 85). Then he was jolted out of his complacency by a heart attack. During his recovery he thought about what had happened and realized that if he had been a poor peasant living near his leisure farm 60 miles from Delhi he would have died because there was no hospital in the area. When he was well enough to walk about near his farm, "he found the villages poorer than he had assumed, the land arid, or salinated from bad irrigation", and many people sick with treatable ailments.

Singh's Big Jolt came when driving back to his farm from Delhi one night. **He came upon a woman in agonizing childbirth by the roadside who needed medical help immediately.** Together with other men he eased her into his car and drove her back to a Delhi hospital where she and her child were saved. He resolved right then to found a small hospital, funding it with his own money and by "calling in the debts of years of lavish hospitality." George and Inge Woodcock became involved in Singh's project, to be called the Canada India Village Aid; it would eventually extend far beyond Singh's farm area to aid hundreds of poor Indians who needed medical help. Singh's own catastrophe and empathy for a desperate woman had paid off handsomely for other people he did not even know.

Jane Addams (1860-1935), an American, was jolted from her complacent life not by seeing extreme examples of poverty and need, but by a bullfight with all its attendant cruelty (Hovde, 1989, 31,36). She had grown up in a comfortable home and been a great success at college, Rockford Seminary; she was president of the literary society, helped found a scientific society, and was valedictorian at her graduation in 1881. But she didn't know what to do next, since few professions at that time were open to women. Her next eight years were "a period of unhappiness, illness, mental depression, and aimless travel" (Hoover, 1989, 36).

Addam's life changed when she analyzed "her initial indifference to the cruelty of a bullfight she saw in Madrid. Her fascination with the ritual, color, music, uniforms, and blood gave way to sorrow and guilt. She had become indifferent, she told herself, to cruelty and pain and had let her vague idea of doing something about human suffering take the place of any real action." Addams thought about all the educated, wealthy women such as herself who had nothing to do to keep them occupied. Then she recalled the poverty she had seen during her travels, most recently that of London "match girls" who were on strike because of low wages. These girls not only worked long hours for little money, but had their faces poisoned by the phosphorous used in

production (called phossy jaw) so that many had to have their lower jawbones removed.

Addams decided to find a place where middle-class women like herself could live closely with the poor to see what help they could offer-- sort of an early urban-American Peace Corps. In 1889, she and a friend arrived in Chicago to establish their settlement, Hull House, in a slum area. It catered to the poor living in the vicinity, giving them advice, nursing help, a day nursery, groups for all ages of people, talks on health and nutrition, entertainment in various immigrant languages, extension college courses, and much more. More than 50,000 people came to Hull House in its first year. As the years passed, she continued to expand the influence of Hull House and to involve herself in local politics and in women's suffrage groups. She was so well known for her work that in 1912 she seconded the nomination of Theodore Roosevelt for president of the United States. Later, she became actively involved with the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. Watching a bull fight in Madrid may have seemed a poor idea to Jane Addams in retrospect, but it reaped a handsome reward over many years for development of American society.

Eleanor Josaitis was jolted by an actual event not that she herself attended, as Addams had a bull fight, but which she saw on television. Early on in her marriage, Josaitis was a housewife and mother living in Detroit without any aspirations to be an activist (Mattison and Storey, 1992, 10ff). That changed one day when she was sitting, pregnant, watching the Nuremberg trials on TV. The news came on with photographs of white policemen on horses riding through crowds in Selma Alabama using cattle prods on black protesters.

"**It hit me: My god, is this America or Nazi Germany?!**" I said to myself: It's nice to be an armchair liberal, but what can you do about it, Josaitis?" She took out a piece of paper and wrote on it, "Above all, do something," which she carried in her wallet from then on.

Before long Josaitis and her family, including her five children, had moved out of the suburbs and into inner-city Detroit. There she began to look into the causes of racial unrest and poverty which she urged priests to address in their pulpits. She and a priest founded FOCUS: HOPE which now has over 100 staff and 22,000 regular volunteers who address policy that improves people's lives in the city. Because of this work she has been asked to serve on several national commissions, including one on maternal, infant and fetal nutrition. Recently the group bought 25 acres of abandoned factories in Detroit, some of which they sold to minority owners who retrained workers. High school dropouts are trained for a factory job if they remain drug-free for six weeks. The group has also added daycare centres for the workers. A television image had inspired action that would provide help for thousands of urban poor.

George Ballard's (1706-1755) big jolt was less traumatic than those described above, but it nevertheless changed the direction of his life (Ballard, 1985). He was apprenticed when young to a tailor to learn the trade of dressmaking with which to support himself, but his interest was in scholarship, centering initially on Roman coins and then on rare books. He had begun to teach himself Anglo-Saxon when he met Elizabeth Elstob, one of England's foremost Saxon scholars; although self-educated, Elstob had translated

Saxon texts and written a Saxon grammar. For lack of money after her brother died, she had had to give up her research 20 years before and now ran single-handed a small primary school for the children of sheep farmers and stocking weavers.

Elstob's story profoundly influenced Ballard. **Here was a woman, as devoted to learning as he himself, whose fortunes had been destroyed because of her brother's death.** How many other women shared her fate, stymied by circumstances and unknown to the world? He began to wonder about other intellectual women in the past who were buried in history, their stories forgotten.

Ballard had been considering writing about the lives of scholars before he met Elstob, but now he realized that he should concentrate on learned women who up until this time had been largely ignored. He began to correspond with Elstob, asking what she knew about various literary women, and found that she also had been collecting information on this subject, specifically and more broadly naming all the famous women the world had ever known.

Ballard spent 16 years writing his masterpiece about women, his major life's work comprising information on 64 remarkable individuals in two large volumes. The published version was less militant for women's equality than he would have wished, but he felt this was necessary because many people derided his efforts to support and commemorate women. Some men were impressed with his industry, however, and he was finally given a job in the Bodleian Library at Oxford University. His work, vital in reclaiming women's stories, is still used by historians.

Another example of people who have been jolted into social activism is **Annie Besant** (1847-1933) who was born and grew up in England in "decorous Whiggism" although she was three-quarters Irish. When she was 20, she became interested in the case of the "Manchester Martyrs" (Nethercot, 1960, 27). A group of Irishmen had surrounded a police van carrying two Fenian leaders whom they planned to free. During the rescue operation a constable was accidentally shot. Most of the men involved including the leaders and the man who had fired the gun escaped, but five were captured. The English populace was enraged with these men, and their trial seemed to Besant a mockery. Her biographer writes, "In the courtroom [Besant and the other women] saw the partiality of the judge and the lethal determination of the jury. From her place in a little room behind the bench Annie could see an official quietly preparing the black caps, which were the sign of 'Guilty', even before the verdict was announced. She saw the 17-year-old's sweetheart kneel and cry to the crowd, 'Save my William!' It was a harrowing and never-forgotten experience." Three of the men were hanged, including William.

Fifty-seven years later, while living in India, Annie Besant wrote that "the love of Liberty first awoke in her through the fate of the 'Manchester Five' and from their cry 'God Save Ireland!'" **When they were convicted, she wrote that "the flame of passionate love of liberty burst out in my heart and has never flickered since."** Her remarkable life included being imprisoned because she advocated knowledge about birth control for women.

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