

LYDIA BECKER: PIONEER ORATOR OF THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

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Lydia Becker, 1827-1890.

The advent of women speaking in public on political issues was one of the most controversial features of the mid-Victorian women's movement, for it challenged the concept of separate spheres¹ which prevented women from entering the public sphere except on purely philanthropic grounds. The successful entry of women into the area of public speaking was the achievement of Lydia Ernestine Becker and the Manchester National Society for Women's Suffrage, whose Secretary she was from 1867 until 1890.

The Society began as a small committee which consisted of several Liberal activists: amongst them Jacob Bright, Max Kyllmann and Samuel Steinthal, but its most outstanding feature was the presence of women, Elizabeth Wolstenholme, Alice Wilson and Elizabeth Gloyne.² In early 1867, due to impending parliamentary activity, the Committee assumed a more permanent form, appointing a new secretary, Lydia Becker, on the 11th February. Lydia was to play a crucial part in the creation of the women's suffrage movement, becoming its chief organiser and directing its strategy. This article concentrates on her role as a pioneer orator and the contributions she made in the area of women as public speakers.

Lydia was an equal rights feminist, who combined exceptional intellectual gifts with a pragmatic outlook. Her formidable personality was described by her biographer, Helen Blackburn:

The weak might feel over-powered in her presence, the over-zealous might be disconcerted by her cool reception of her zeal, but those who had power to appreciate power appreciated their, according to the measure of their own power.³

Her commitment to the women's suffrage movement lay in the belief that the vote would elevate the status of women in society:

The shortest and most effective way, nay, the only way, of raising the position of women, is to give them votes.⁴

Until her arrival in Manchester in 1865, when her family made their home in Grove Street, Ardwick, Lydia had spent a quiet secluded life in the country around Altham. Largely self-educated, her main interest was in science: in 1864 she became a member of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, and in the same year published a book *Botany for Novices*. The eldest of a large family,⁵ unmarried and as a woman denied a liberal education and entry into the professions, Lydia was eager to participate in the intellectual life of Manchester, only to discover that in the era of literary and scientific clubs (Manchester had several, including the Literary and Philosophical Society) she was excluded on the basis of sex:

these institutions have a deficiency.. they draw an arbitrary line among scientific students and say to one half of the human race — you shall not enter into the advantages we have to offer.⁶

The result was the formation of the Manchester Ladies' Literary Society launched on the 30th January, 1869 at the Royal Institution in Moseley Street. Its foundation and activities displayed many of the features which were to characterise her future work: boldness, a willingness to innovate, organisational ability and a strong determination to break into the male sphere. This ambitious venture had to be abandoned because of her new involvement with the suffrage which began with the collection of signatures for a parliamentary petition in 1867. It was through this activity that she made contact with the Manchester Committee.

Under her steadily growing influence, the Manchester Society, (formally constituted in August, 1867), embarked on its most militant enterprise, the 'Persons' Campaign', a protest against women's exclusion from the Second Reform Act. Its object was to show that the majority of Manchester's women rate-payers desired the vote by placing as many of their names as possible on the new electoral registers of 1868.⁷ It was in order to meet the needs of the Campaign that women appeared in the public sphere as political activists, for it was perceived that if the Society was to be recognised as a viable pressure group their participation in the advocacy of the suffrage was essential. To obtain maximum publicity for the Campaign, they began with a public meeting: "A question is never considered one of practical politics till advocates appeal to public opinion in this way".⁸ Moreover this was to include "an effective demonstration of ladies on the platform".⁹ Responsibility for the meeting devolved largely on Lydia, as Secretary. Her organisational skills

and acute perceptions of women's potential were to make the occasion a success.

Both the emergence and development of women as orators was a difficult issue as it presaged fundamental changes in the roles they played in society; the few women who had spoken in public before had done so only on a religious platform. These included, for example, Quaker preachers, and Catherine Booth of the Salvation Army who had addressed her husband's congregation in June, 1860.¹⁰ Lydia perceived that women speakers could be accepted by a mixed audience when she took part in a discussion at the British Association "if women will meet quietly, do what they feel they can do and make no fuss — they may do so with approval..."¹¹ But the further, and considerably more radical, step of women speaking on political questions needed to be tested before the irrevocable action was taken of a major public meeting. She planned to test the reaction of the audience at the forthcoming Conference of the Reform Union, which was to be held in Manchester. In this atmosphere of reform, it was possible that female speakers might be given a sympathetic hearing. On the 11th February, Lydia and Alice Wilson went to the Reform Club. Towards the end of the proceedings, and to the great surprise of the audience, Wilson stood up and with great assurance and coolness asked them to assent to the proposition that:

no householder rented for the relief of the poor ought to be excluded from the franchise

— in effect a demand for women's suffrage. She had thereby made a successful breach against the male

monopoly of public speaking. The speech was greeted with unanimous cheering; Wilson's performance was greatly admired, for a woman had not only spoken at a political rally but spoken with calm, brevity and "political tact", putting an end to the "alleged notion of female loquacity".¹²

This success was followed by the Society's first public meeting on the 14th April, held before a crowded audience in the Assembly Room of the Free Trade Hall, a theatre where many remarkable meetings had been held in the past, but perhaps none more significant than this 'Ladies Meeting'. It marked the beginning of a new era, not only in the women's suffrage movement but also in its effect on the process of women's emancipation. The way was opened for women to speak on all issues. Moreover it also dealt a serious blow to the concept of separate spheres, for its main feature, a bold tactic and a major innovation, was the appearance of several women on the platform advocating a political cause. The meeting was chaired by the Mayor of Salford, H.D. Pochin, and the three separate resolutions were proposed by women and seconded by men. The first, and most important, was made by Lydia, and asked for the women's right to vote "on the same condition as it is or may be to men".¹³ Agnes Pochin and Anne Robertson¹⁴ moved the remaining resolutions: these pledged support to their Parliamentary friends and urged those women who had the necessary legal qualifications to put their names on the electoral registers.

Despite the apparent moderation of the resolutions the underlying theme was one of discontent and rebellion. Pochin spoke of the true situation in which women like

Title Page of Annual Report of Manchester National Society for Women's Suffrage, 1871.

FOURTH ANNUAL REPORT

OF THE

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

OF THE

MANCHESTER NATIONAL SOCIETY FOR
WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE.

PRESENTED AT THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING,
NOVEMBER 20, 1871.

MANCHESTER:
ALEXANDER IRELAND & CO., PRINTERS.
1871.

MANCHESTER NATIONAL SOCIETY FOR WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE.

Members of the Society and others are earnestly requested to aid the movement for procuring the passing of the Bill to remove the electoral disabilities of women.

I. By collecting signatures to the petition, forms of which may be obtained from the Secretary.

II. By bringing the question under the notice of Members of Parliament, whenever they appear before their constituents.

III. Should notice of any motion, friendly or hostile, be given in the House of Commons—by writing letters, asking the local Members to support the principle of Women's Suffrage.

IV. In case of an election, by calling on every candidate to declare whether he will, if returned, vote for the Bill to remove the electoral disabilities of women.

V. By trying to procure insertion of facts and arguments bearing on the question, in the local press.

VI. By communicating to the Secretary any information likely to be useful to the Society, and the names of such persons as may be disposed to assist the cause.

VII. Where there are three or four members in the same place, by uniting to form a local committee.

VIII. By endeavouring to increase the number of members.

IX. By extending the organisation of the Society through the medium of corresponding members or local committees. All persons willing to render such assistance are earnestly requested to communicate with the Secretary.

Further information will be willingly afforded to all who may desire it.

LYDIA E. BECKER, SECRETARY,
28, Jackson's Row, Albert Square, Manchester

WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE.

A PUBLIC MEETING of INHABITANTS to promote a Memorial to Her Majesty's Government, praying that Women Householders and Ratepayers may be enfranchised before another General Election, will be held in the TOWN HALL, CHORLTON-ON-MEDLOCK, on *Tuesday Evening, January 27th, 1880*, when ADDRESSES will be delivered by

MISS BECKER,
MISS C. A. BIGGS,
MISS HELENA DOWNING,
AND OTHER FRIENDS.



The Chair will be taken at 7-30, by Mrs. ROBY.

PLATFORM.

Admission Free. Seats will be Reserved for Ladies.

Ticket for Women's Suffrage Meeting, 1880.

herself, found themselves, "In a state of chronic effervescence, soured by injustice, fretted by the possession of energies which they are required to repress". The allegation that women were content under the deprivation of political rights was challenged by Becker: "This...was false. They were not content". The address concluded with a demand for "a nation of free women as well as for free men".¹⁵ Of the three women who spoke, Becker made the greatest impact, both as an effective speaker, and for the trenchant, forceful style — the "boldness of attack"¹⁶ which was to characterise all her future speeches.

The women were staunchly supported by male members of the Society: Jacob Bright, T.B. Potter, R.M. Pankhurst, B. Whitworth and F.W. Myers; whilst the presence of a church dignitary, Archdeacon Sandford, gave respectability to the occasion. The noticeable absence of representatives from other societies highlighted the risky nature of the venture. That courage and commitment of a high order were needed by those who participated was borne out by the personal and public attacks which followed. Becker was to bear the brunt of these: "I have", she wrote during the height of the 'Persons' Campaign', "had a horror of newspapers lately and rather avoid looking into them".¹⁷ The same basic arguments were used against the suffragists throughout the struggle; a woman's place was in the home, political agitation by women was not acceptable. A major part of the opposition was provided by the ideology of the Church, seen clearly in the reaction of the *Manchester Courier*: "Men generally prefer that their wives should devote themselves to the duties for which their Maker seems especially to have designed them."¹⁸ The debate exposed the Victorian double standard which allowed women to

*come in large numbers into our pantomimes less than half clad in order to gratify the eye by their skill in dancing...It is only when inspired by some high motive...that it is said women ought not to appear in public.*¹⁹

It was to take many years before women were accepted in this new and most radical of roles. Their intrusion into the area of public oratory was to be subjected to keen scrutiny.

The Free Trade Hall meeting demonstrated women's capability to speak in public and at the same time announced their determination to become political activists. Their success was reflected in the public reaction, that of genuine surprise. It was reported that the "resolutions were proposed and exactly as if it were a real meeting".²⁰ The anti-feminist press expressed incredulity and indignation, but significantly the condescension that women were usually subjected to was absent. Instead grudging admiration was expressed for Becker's performance, she had fulfilled "the duty she undertook, as like the real thing as could be".²¹ Once the 'breakthrough' had been made, other meetings followed. Lydia spoke at the public meeting organised by the Birmingham Society in May while in October the Manchester Society held its first annual meeting in the Town Hall, chaired by a woman, Phillippine Kyllmann.

The Society's decision to introduce a Women's Suffrage Bill into Parliament in 1870, compelled Lydia to undertake a pioneer series of lectures in northern England in the Spring of 1869. It was during these that the problems which faced women orators were confronted and largely solved. The lectures on *The Claims of Women to Representation in the House of Commons* indicated her



Lydia Becker.

two main interests: women's right to the franchise and to education.²²

The first immediate problem to be faced was the technical one of learning to speak with confidence without a script. This was quickly seized on by the 'Antis': "she can do little without manuscript"²³ After reading a lecture at Leeds she pronounced herself "bewildered, puzzled, unnerved and dissatisfied by my lecture, and unable to see my way clearly to mend matters"²⁴ This difficulty was resolved by persistence and practice. As Secretary of the Manchester Society Becker spoke at all major Suffrage meetings, so that in time the 'woodenness' was replaced by the poise of an accomplished speaker, "perfectly cool and ready, knowing just how to produce a given effect on her audience"²⁵

The more serious and profound problems which had to be solved were those allied with women's lack of authority which arose from women's low political, social and economic status, their supposed mental and physical inferiority, and the traditional notion that they were unstable, frivolous creatures unfit for the public sphere. The first women speakers were not only objects of curiosity but they were also often subjected to ridicule; here Lydia's mental agility and scathing humour made her adept at dealing with hecklers.²⁶ In the early years the presence of male members of the Society was invaluable in these situations. For example, during a lecture in Longsight much hilarity was caused by the comments of a Mr Benson, but the atmosphere was quickly stabilised by

the intercession of Thomas Chorlton, who sharply pointed out that "he had apparently misunderstood the nature of the Movement Miss Becker is advocating, in as much the plan for Women's Suffrage was advocated as they were householders and ratepayers in their own right"²⁷ The accepted notion of Victorian womanhood was successfully countered, artificial self-consciousness and timidity were replaced with the new image projected by Lydia: one of dignity and composure: "the clearest, calmest, best-balanced speaker the Movement has ever produced"²⁸ Her true sensitivity and depth of feeling were revealed only on the occasions when she spoke movingly of the violence suffered by wives. Audiences were impressed — and undoubtedly converted to the Cause — by her evident intellectual ability and command of subject matter: the *Gazette* described her as "clever" and as "obviously an educated Lady"²⁹

Women's status in the public sphere was enhanced when their right to vote in municipal elections was restored by the Municipal Amendment Act in 1869. The following year W.E. Forster's Elementary Education Act gave women the right to vote for, and to become members of, the new School Boards. Becker, who stood as an independent, unsectarian and feminist candidate,³⁰ was the first woman to be elected, holding her position on the Manchester School Board through several triennial elections until her death in 1890. The significance of her achievement was recognised by the *Manchester Examiner*: she had gained: "a conspicuous and influential position which elevate her work and her words into a matter of undeniable public importance"³¹ and one which was exploited to the utmost to further the advance of women. Like the male members, Lydia Becker played a prominent part in public proceedings; these involved giving many speeches, at prize givings, elections and at the opening of new Board Schools. At the end of the first three years her success and importance were recognised when she was accepted as a member of the Liberal/Unsectarian team working for educational progress against the Voluntarists. On the electoral platform Lydia was seen as a valuable asset who could — as a woman and a successful speaker — draw a full audience, and who moreover brought with her the support of the majority of the female electors.

Attention here was focused on a new issue; the realisation that the vocabulary of politics excluded women. This question arose when she queried the logic of a woman like herself issuing a manifesto, but the implications of further fundamental change proved too disturbing for the problem to be treated with any seriousness.³² Speeches on education matters centred on the disparity of treatment between the boys and girls in Manchester, the 'feminine' curriculum (needlework and domestic subjects) which girls were compelled to study at the expense of science was constantly under attack, demands were made for equality in the quantity and quality of education provided for girls. Impatience at the prejudice displayed by the Voluntarists on the School Board resulted in her giving some of her most abrasive speeches. When laying the foundation stone of a new Board School in Burgess Street her comments were a direct criticism of the Board School's policy which aimed to produce housewives and mothers.

*It was a great mistake to suppose that domestic duties were limited to girls and women... every boy in Manchester should be taught to darn his own socks and cook his own chops.*³³

Lydia used the British Association as a platform for the discussion of women's suffrage and education, enlarging the area which was available for feminist issues, the major public forum having previously been the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science. Women were able to infiltrate because of the strongly social nature of its meetings when wives and other female relatives attended: "The social side of the 'B.A.' was emphasised by the presence of women, often in large numbers".³⁴

Despite this apparent liberalism the British Association practised discrimination against women in several ways. It had carefully concealed lines of demarcation in which certain subjects such as Botany, Astronomy and Travel were regarded as being suitable for the 'weaker' sex, and the very few women who contributed papers did so only on these 'safe' subjects. But Lydia's contributions demonstrated a characteristically fearless disregard for tradition; her first and most controversial lecture, given at

the Norwich meeting in 1868, created a "deal of amusement and elicited frequent and loud cheering during a crowded meeting" because of its "Title, Sex and Fame of its Reader". The paper explored *Some Supposed Differences in the minds of Men and Women with Regard to Educational Necessities*, concluding that superiority of intellect was not due to sexual differences but to environmental causes, especially women's lack of education. Again the tactics of ridicule were attempted during the subsequent discussion. The Reverend A. Jessop drew laughter from the audience with the remark that he "did not see the force of the illustration from bee-land", whilst the President of the Section, Samuel Brown, reminded women of their higher mission in life "in which the delicacy, refinement, and grace, which formed the charm of the female mind, were more important than the pursuits of Science".³⁵ Clearly, the 'Parliament of Science' permitted a limited career for amateur scientists like Lydia.

But she was not to be dissuaded and continued in the following year with a lecture to the Zoology and Botany Section on "Lychnis Diurna" (the Red Campion). "*On Some Maxims of Political Economy as Applied to the Employment of Women and the Education of Girls*" given at Edinburgh in 1871 demanded equal pay. In the following year she read a paper "*On the Attendance and Education of Girls in the Elementary Schools of Manchester*" drawing attention to the School Board's discriminatory financial policy towards girls. The 1870s showed a slight increase in the number of women lecturing, for example the educationists Maria Grey and Emily Shireff, and the suffragists Anna Priestman and Miss Beedy. Their contributions, like Lydia's, were dependent on the existence of male feminists as Secretaries or Presidents of the British Association's sections.³⁶ The entrenched resistance shown by the male scientists allowed for only a limited progress for women lecturers. However, Lydia had demonstrated women's competence to speak and to debate on a wide range of issues and in so doing had speeded up the process of women's acceptance.

The final step in women's progress to independence as public speakers was both initiated and guided by Lydia: this was the all-female meeting. The determination that women should be able to voice their own independent demands for inclusion in the next measure of parliamentary reform provided the impetus. The revolutionary concept of an all-female meeting began in a minor way, with the organisation of municipal election meetings in Manchester in 1878, called to impress upon women the importance of registering their votes. The first was held in St. Luke's Ward, and showed clearly how popular and well-known she had become.³⁷ Its success suggested to her the possibility of a much larger political demonstration. In February, 1880 a Great Demonstration was held in the Free Trade Hall, with the Hall itself and the Memorial Hall packed to overflowing. The Demonstration ranked with any male political rally as it was organised, addressed and almost solely attended by women — "without the aid of great men's names to draw them".³⁸ It was an occasion (in its organiser's words) "unique in the history and political life of mankind".³⁹ Alexander Dunkley, the Editor of the *Manchester Examiner*, hailed Lydia as a liberator:

*perhaps six centuries hence Miss Becker will be revered as the Moses or Simon de Montfort of her sex.*⁴⁰



Cartoon on Women Suffragists in Bradford from The Yorkshireman, November, 1881.

The Manchester Demonstration was followed by others in the major industrial cities, including London, Bristol, Birmingham, Bradford, Glasgow and Edinburgh. At each one Lydia was a leading speaker and the meetings were organised under her careful guidance. On each occasion memorials were adopted calling for women's suffrage in halls which were full to capacity; 5,000 seats were filled at Glasgow, at Bradford nearly 3,000 were present. The women regarded them as a great triumph, for they showed to the public their political and organisational ability as well as their speaking skills. They also revealed the growing number of women who were willing to follow Lydia's lead and brave public criticism: Alice Scatcherd, Eliza Sturge, Ellen Hibbert, Eliza Wigham, Jessie Craigen, Patricia McLaren and Helena Downing became seasoned and eloquent speakers. The effects of the Great Meetings were soon seen in the growing acceptance of women in political life. Helen Bright Clark and Jane Cobden were invited to support the Women's Suffrage Resolution at the Great Liberal Conference held in Leeds in 1883. In the same year the Primrose League was founded, followed in 1887 by the Women's Liberal Federation.⁴¹ During these two decades — from 1868 onwards — there was a vigorous growth of suffrage organisations in which a network of societies was built up throughout Britain with Becker and the Manchester Society at its centre;⁴² proof of an effective verbal advocacy.

It will be evident that Lydia Becker was an eminent Manchester figure; as a leader of a national movement and as an outstanding member of the School Board whose impact and influence were at their greatest in the area of public speaking, and who was, in the words of the

Manchester journal, the *City Jackdaw*, "A public man of whom Manchester has reason to be proud".⁴³ Her work brought her into contact with leading dignitaries, often sharing a platform with Mayors, Aldermen and Councillors, with leading educationists including H.E. Roscoe and Professor Adamson, the Liberal MPs Jacob Bright, John Slagg, Hugh Mason and Henry Rawson. Such associations undoubtedly conferred high status both with the general public and in the women's movement. As a democrat Lydia was especially popular with the working classes. As social humanitarian reformer, she advocated temperance, co-operation, married women's property rights, and also worked to improve the condition of the people by directing attention to the lowly status of working-class women and the needs of the very poor child.⁴⁴ The warmth of feeling which she could evoke from an audience of working-class women is clearly evident in the following account — which also shows her own sensitive response, when, after giving an address, the applause from the women was:

so hearty and strong... I should have fancied it was men who were cheering and clapping. I can't tell you how my heart went out to those women, and to see them look at me — oh, it was really sacred — awful, it was as if I received a baptism.⁴⁵

Lydia was a prolific speaker, often following a punishing schedule. The introduction of women's suffrage measures into parliament and the School Board Elections meant an intensification of effort, and during the 1879 electoral campaign she spoke no less than four times in the course of one evening.⁴⁶

Women's Suffrage Journal, 1890.

WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE JOURNAL.

MEMORIAL NUMBER.

LYDIA ERNESTINE BECKER.

August, 1890.

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LYDIA ERNESTINE BECKER.

NONE of those who have been in any degree associated with Miss BECKER in her work can have heard of her death without a peculiar sense of sadness. The news came upon us suddenly. She had for some little time been in ill health, she was indeed abroad in quest of recovery; but we had heard of an improvement in her condition, and it was understood that an ailment that had never been regarded with anxiety had almost disappeared. But the feeling of security that arising vanished in a moment. The development of a new illness and her death were announced together. And when the tragic details followed the shadow of calamity deepened and became more oppressive. Yet it was not that Miss BECKER'S death was unlooked for, nor the apprehension that it might, under better circumstances, have been prevented, that most affected the sympathies of her friends. Their most poignant feeling of sorrow was that she should have passed away without having seen the triumph that had so lately seemed so near at hand. It had almost been realised. As far as political calculation could be assured, a House of Commons had been elected, the majority of whose members were ready to confer on women the right to vote in Parliamentary elections on the conditions which entitled men to the franchise, and there was a reasonable confidence that the House of Lords would confirm and complete the decision of the Commons. Miss BECKER was justified in the strongest hopes of the near future. But the chances which determine in Parliament what shall be undertaken and what shall be left unattempted proved against the cause to which she was devoted. The ballot was untriumphantly, and even when a chance—a possible chance—presented itself it was somewhat elusively lost. So Miss BECKER has left us with her work unfinished after the end had been within reach. That it cannot be long delayed in the faith her friends hold in quiet and confident strength; that when it comes Miss BECKER will be entitled to a great share in the result they know; that it must remain a fond regret that she did not live to share

the reward of earnest and thorough work pursued with unswerving zeal and with a single regard to the cause of the welfare of women.

To secure to women a voice in the election of members of the Legislature was Miss BECKER'S aim. Not that her life was engrossed with this object. All that tended to the education and elevation of her sex engaged her sympathies and attracted her cooperation. From the first she was a member of the Manchester School Board, where her help was prized by all her colleagues. But it was in connection with the Parliamentary franchise that she was best known, and it is only in relation to it that I can speak as a fellow worker. I may say at once I have rarely known any one with a better political capacity. To be an advocate of women's rights may make a woman the object of high admiration or the subject of cheap and transitory satire; and it must be admitted broadly that the pioneer's lonely field cannot be pre-eminently in that compass of manner which so sweetly befits those who can dwell in the grace and quietude of domestic felicity undisturbed by the strange promptings of fresh enterprise. Miss BECKER knew what it was to be laughed at, without being thereby diverted from her path. Keen and yet calm, watchful and wary, resolute to seize every opportunity of progress, but restraining herself from wasteful work, she showed all the qualities which make up a director of political movements—an idealist in her aims, a realist in her appreciation and management of means—thoroughly possessing the machinery and thoroughly possessed of the purpose; all the machinery was to accomplish. She had at command all the comparatively poor art of Parliamentary procedure which not a few members of Parliament never succeed in mastering. All these qualities necessarily have their counterparts. They naturally fitted her to lead, except in respect of concealment of leadership. Her group of advocates of women's suffrage, like all other political groups, male, female, or mixed, is not free from variations of temper and capacity;



Lydia Becker died suddenly, from diphtheria, in July 1890.⁴⁷ Her death was viewed by many as a tragic for the goal of Women's Suffrage had not been achieved; yet many who had participated in the Movement since its early days believed that her "special work" had been accomplished.⁴⁸ Her years as a pioneer orator were highly productive and were distinguished by major triumphs which had beneficial and lasting results. The editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, C.P. Scott, regarded Lydia as responsible for bringing women successfully into the area of public speaking, by changing the public's attitude. Although she was well aware of the bigotry and ridicule she would have to encounter, "she allowed neither sarcasm nor indignation to turn her from her purpose".⁴⁹ The process was one of 'softening up', of allaying fears and accustoming people to the idea of women as orators. This was largely accom-

THE LATE MISS LYDIA BECKER.

(From a Photograph by Warwick Brookes.)

plished by the time of her death. The suffragist style of oratory was abandoned by the Manchester based Women's Social and Political Union which decided to use more militant tactics and practised rowdiness and disruption,⁵⁰ as a result the hard won acceptance of women as public speakers suffered a temporary setback.

Lydia Becker's contributions have gone largely unacknowledged, mainly because she led a successful attack on the Victorian concept of Separate Spheres. Undoubtedly she has also been marginalised because of the pioneering nature of her work, the efforts of pioneers and the difficulties they faced are often not appreciated by those who follow. Her belief in the potential of women, that they were "a force which, if gathered together, led, organised and made manifest, is enough to lead us to Victory"⁵¹ was to prove correct.

NOTES

- 1 M. Vicinus (Ed.) *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women*, (1980), is a particularly valuable book on the concept of separate spheres.
- 2 Wolstenholme, Gloyne and Wilson were schoolmistresses; later becoming involved in the North of England Council for the Higher Education of Women. Bright, Steinthal and Kyllmann worked for Universal Household Suffrage, Co-operation, Anti-Slavery and Temperance.
- 3 Helen Blackburn, *A Record of the Women's Suffrage Movement in the British Isles, with Biographical Sketches of Miss Becker*, (1902) p. 40
- 4 Manchester Central Library Archives (hereafter MCLA) National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (hereafter NUWSS), Lydia Becker's Letterbook, L. Becker to J. Butler, 1 November 1868.
- 5 The Becker family came from Ohrdruff, Thuringia, at the beginning of the century; they were owners of a bleaching works at Reddish. Lydia's mother, Mary Duncuft, was the daughter of a Hollinwood mill owner.
- 6 H. Blackburn, *A Record of the Women's Suffrage Movement...* p.33
- 7 For an account of the 'Persons Campaign' see R. Strachey, *The Cause*, (1928).
- 8 Letterbook, L. Becker to Anne Robertson, 30 March 1868
- 9 London, Library of Political and Economic Science, (LSE), Mill/Taylor MSS, Vol. XII, L. Becker to H. Taylor, 5 December, 1867
- 10 O. Anderson, Women Preachers in Mid-Victorian Britain, *Historical Journal*, Vol. XIII (1959) pp. 467-84
- 11 LSE Mill/Taylor MSS, Vol. XII, n.d.
- 12 MCLA NUWSS, Newspaper cuttings (hereafter NC) Vol I, *Manchester Examiner*, 12 February 1868
- 13 Ibid., 'The Franchise for Women', n.d., NC Vol. I. Lydia was the last minute substitute for Helen Bright Clark (daughter of John Bright), who had a heavy cold.
- 14 Agnes Pochin, wife of H.D. Pochin, had advocated women's suffrage (using the pseudonym 'Justitia'), in a pamphlet *The Right of Women to Exercise the Elective Franchise* (1858). Robertson was the Secretary of the Dublin Society.
- 15 *Report of the Public Meeting held at Manchester, 14th April, 1868.* (Manchester, 1868)
- 16 MCLA, NUWSS, NC, *Burnley Advertiser*, 25 April 1868
- 17 Letterbook, L. Becker to J. Butler, 18 September 1868
- 18 MCLA, NUWSS, NC, Vol I *Manchester Courier*, 16 April 1868
- 19 Jacob Bright's speech, given at the Free Trade Hall on 24 February 1874, reported in the *Women's Suffrage Journal* March 1874, p. 39. The *Journal* was the creation of Becker, who was its editor and business manager from March 1870 to July 1890.
- 20 MCLA, NUWSS, Lydia Becker's Scrapbook, *The Southport Visitor*, 20 January 1887

- 21 MCLA, NUWSS, NC, Vol I, *Burnley Advertiser*, 25 April 1868
 22 MCLA, NUWSS, NC, Vol II *Daily Chronicle*, 1 April 1869
 23 MCLA, NUWSS, NC Vol II, *The Gazette*, Local Notes, by 'Spectator', n.d.
 24 H. Blackburn, *A Record of the Women's Suffrage Movement*, p. 90
 25 MCLA, NUWSS, NC, Vol V, *Bradford Observer*, 26 November 1881
 26 As on the occasion when her speech was interrupted by a drunken youth, he was summarily dealt with: referred to as a "specimen of a class of individuals who conclusively proved their incapacity to govern women by showing their utter incapacity to govern themselves". MCLA, NUWSS, NC Vol II *Stockport Advertiser*, 13 April 1872
 27 MCLA, NUWSS, NC Vol II *Manchester Examiner* 16 April 1869 A lawyer, Chorlton took an active part in the 'Persons' Campaign, and was a lifelong member of the Society
 28 H. Blackburn, *A Record of the Women's Suffrage Movement*, p. 40
 29 MCLA, NUWSS, NC Vol II *Gazette*, Local Notes, by 'Spectator', n.d.
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 41 As the leader of a pressure group which had to remain politically non-aligned, Lydia was not associated with either.
 42 By 1872 the *Women's Suffrage Journal* had recorded 69
 43 *City Jackdaw*, 31 December 1875, pp. 69-70
 44 *Manchester Examiner*, 7 November 1882
 45 H. Blackburn, *A Record of the Women's Suffrage Movement*, p. 148
 46 *Manchester Guardian*, 1 November 1879
 47 *The Women's Suffrage Journal*, *Memorial Number*, August 1890, edited by Blackburn, contains many tributes to Lydia and an account of her death
 48 Priscilla Bright McLaren: *Women's Suffrage Journal*, *Memorial Number*, August 1890, p. 9
 49 C.P. Scott's obituary on Becker appeared in the *Manchester Guardian* on 21 July 1890
 50 S.E. Pankhurst, *Suffragette Movement* (1977) is useful for a description of their activities, although lacking in discussion. For its counter-productive effects on members of the Liberal Government see the *Political Diaries of C.P. Scott*, (Ed. Trevor Wilson, (1970), especially pp.33-7
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