

# ISABELLA ORMSTON FORD (1855-1924)

by: Dr.Amanda Wilkinson

Isabella Ormston Ford was born on the 23rd May 1855. She was the youngest of eight children. Her parents, Robert and Hannah, were Quakers and the young Isabella was brought up in a family greatly concerned with women's rights and humanitarian causes, an upbringing which would affect her entire life's work. Isabella became, arguably, one of the most important women ever to write about women's rights, and women's working conditions, bringing to the masses, through her pamphlets, speeches and Union actions, the true plight of working-class women, and the conditions they faced in the workplace. There are some fabulous biographies of Isabella already in circulation, including a particularly thorough examination of her life and political viewpoints by June Hannam (<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/printable/39084>), so instead this article will consider what Isabella stood for, how she publicised the plight of women and their working conditions, and her solutions for what she referred to as 'the real evil' of indifference and ignorance as to their plight.

One of the most important pamphlets written by Isabella for the Humanitarian League was *Women's Wages*, and the conditions under which they are earned. (William Reeves, London, 1893). In this seventeen page pamphlet Isabella made an impassioned plea to the public to understand that the way in which women were being 'rescued' by the middle-class philanthropists, was causing more problems for the poor and oppressed, than the employers had in the first place. Philanthropists, she argued throughout her life, provided a sticking plaster, an ineffective temporary relief, not even a cure, when what was needed was prevention. Isabella was frustrated that the educated middle-classes showed little interest in the conditions in which women were working and the problems they were facing, choosing instead, so Isabella complained, to focus on 'restoring life and happiness to women, a vast proportion of whom would never have required any such help if the conditions of their working lives, and especially their wages, had been such as to bring even the smallest amount of happiness or comfort within their reach.' (*Women's Wages*, p.4) She railed against the accepted convention which suggested that a woman should in no way revolt, but instead should accept any injustice shown to her. To be a woman and to complain was in some way almost irreligious, a woman should accept her lot, no matter how bad. Isabella despaired at the ineffectiveness of any help given – it being focussed on 'rescuing' individual women, thus benefiting the helper, making him appear a kind and benevolent being, and the woman helped (temporarily), but not on understanding and solving the problems which women were faced with in their working lives and uncovering why these women, in their droves, chose to enter low paid occupations in terrible conditions.

Firstly, in *Women's Wages*, Isabella brought to the forefront the issue of wages paid to women and she went into great detail, examining the wages of women in occupations spread across the country, showing how they were paid a wage so low that they could not afford to pay their rent and eat, let alone have any small pleasures in their lives. She forced the reading public to understand that women were being forced to work from early in the morning to late at night, every day, with only an hour break, if they were lucky and not 'locked in' by their employer. She

linked the nature of their work, (unskilled) to their wages, pointing out that the brain requires food to work and to develop skills (which would lead to an increase in wages), but the wages being paid were insufficient to provide enough food for the women to use their brains, thus creating a vicious circle. We now, may see this as rather simplistic and not biologically correct – however, Isabella was able to show that women’s health, and their mental wellbeing was being damaged by the poverty they were forced to endure. Conversely, she was able to show that where a woman was intelligent; where she was able to find a way to increase her output, an employer would reduce her wages, and also that of her peers in many instances, thus increasing his profit. Even where women were able to work enough hours to make a living wage, Isabella showed that they rarely received it in full – the system of fines for poor work (rarely proved), and enforced idleness where a girl was ‘locked in’ when there was apparently no work available but she was kept in the factory and prevented from working without pay, meant that women were regularly paid far less than the wage books would show. Isabella argued that the systems in place in many factories and sweat shops led to the women suffering not only monetarily, but also, she suggested, morally and emotionally – Isabella was one of the first feminists to bring to the forefront the issue of what we now know as ‘the casting couch’. She explained how, ‘women who will submit or respond to his coarse jokes and language and evil behaviour, receive more work than the woman who feels and shows herself insulted by such conduct.’ (p13) Isabella asserted that none of these issues were acknowledged or remedied by the philanthropist approach. Women needed to take action themselves, to understand that ‘salvation’ came from within and not without. Legislation, she insisted, was only part of the solution – the real force for change would come from women and from teaching women that they should not conform to the ‘little woman’ beliefs of contemporary thought, but from teaching girls to rebel and not to submit. ‘We must arouse them to a better knowledge of their own worth, their own infinite value. We must stir within them a discontent which will make them loathe their surroundings, and make them insist on obtaining happiness and rest. We must show them it is one of the most selfish crimes to submit to injustice, since each of these submissions adds a link to the chain of slavery fettering all working women, not in England only, but all over the world.’ (p. 15) She despaired at the problems facing women, at the difficulty of understanding your own self worth in a world where women were ‘not recognised as citizens (except as regards penalties), forever classed with “lunatics, imbeciles and paupers”’. (p.16) Isabella was able to show that for women to obtain any degree of equality in their wages (a cause for which she was a firm supporter), then women had to be acknowledged as being good and intelligent and that the powers that be had to understand that they were every bit as worthy as men, intellectually and physically. She was also convinced that until the philanthropists could understand that their methods were ‘unscientific and superficial’ then nothing could change.

Isabella truly believed, however, ‘that a better day is dawning’, and that the movements she was seeing in the burgeoning women’s trade union movements (she was President at this time of the Leeds Tailoresses’ Union), and the increasing interest in the suffrage movement convinced her that if only women themselves could understand their self-worth and their inherent strength, then change must surely follow. A pacifist until the end of her life, she was never a fanatic, never took part in the more radical activities of her peers, preferring to work, and work hard, even in her later life when ill health affected her ability to travel, to protect the weak, and to encourage self development and understanding. She was a woman who fought hard, her entire life, for the

causes of socialism and feminism, but unlike many of the other leading ladies of the feminist and suffrage movements has been all but forgotten by history. Let's leave the last word to Isabella, a statement which seems to sum up her life's work: "Freedom is what women cry for, not philanthropy"

Dr Amanda Wilkinson, graduated with a PhD in 2012 from the University of Essex; her thesis examined Women and Occupations in the Victorian Censuses: 1851-1901. She is a teacher specialising in British history and research officer, and also the Deputy Director of Admissions for the Dept of History at Essex. Her main research interests include women's occupations in the nineteenth century, and the ways in which the state chose to record the economic contribution of women.

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Isabella Ormston Ford was the daughter of Robert Lawson Ford and his wife Hannah Pease and granddaughter of Thomas Bensen Pease and his wife Martha Whitelock. The family were Quakers from the 17<sup>th</sup> century in the area of Leeds, Yorkshire. WHITLOCK57 family.

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