

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra and today I'm joined by Dr. Josephine Browne, a teaching associate at Southern Cross University and member of the executive of the Australian Gender and Women's Studies Association, to discuss Mary Ward, her 1894 novel, *Marcella* and the New Man / New Woman movement of that period. So first, could you give us a brief bit of context around the New Man and the New Woman?

JB: The period of the 1890s in London and Europe was a time of huge change. There was a lot of different movements that pretty much coalesced in that period. One of the first people to write about it afterwards said it was this time where everybody felt they're on the cusp of a wave. Just to mention some of those movements that were creating this sort of interest in gender diversity and pushing back against Victorian norms. Some of the things that were coming up were what was known as "the woman question" at the time. So this is the pre-suffragette era. And the woman question was really highlighted as the marriage question. There was a surplus of females at the time. So there was an issue with, what are we going to do with the surplus women in the country? There was also a big interest in marriage and motherhood because the Contagious Diseases Acts had really raised a profile that engaged a lot of women politically, because it raised this idea about syphilis and about syphilis contagion. Because as you probably know, men were allowed to go and sow their wild oats, so to speak, but women were to remain pure before marriage. So we're talking middle class, upper class women. And what this resulted in was number one, girls were ignorant about sex and sexuality. But number two, they were often married to syphilitic men. They got syphilis themselves, and they gave birth to syphilitic children, who often died. And the mothers also often died.

AT: And a big part of that problem was because their male doctors were protecting their husbands. So the men were getting treated, but the women weren't even told that they had syphilis.

JB: And women didn't even know that this existed. Like it actually, the Contagious Diseases Acts and the whole rise of this awareness of syphilis is credited with the burgeoning engagement of women politically, like a big part of the whole women's movement that eventually led to the suffragettes and the demand for the vote. And at the same time, there was a movement about aestheticism that had arisen in the middle of the century. So that was very much about beauty and art for art's sake. It went into things like the decoration of homes. So again, this is very much a classed issue. It's a middle class, upper class. The decoration of homes, the wearing of aesthetic dress. There was the rational dress movement that was founded in the 1880s as part of all of this. Oscar Wilde's wife was one of the co-founders of that movement. So there were lots of women wearing flowing, floating garments. So there was a big influence of Grecian and Roman ideas. And this also connects to the idea of decadence, which really is thought to have arisen in Paris and is very strongly associated with Paris. But the decadent movement arose out of the aesthetic movement. And we're really only starting to get a handle on the decadent movement. That's really a huge area of research at the moment, which was a fear that society might be about to collapse, that this could be the end of an age or the end of an era. So the association there was with the collapse of Rome, collapsing civilization. So there were fears of collapse and a lot of anxiety. But at the same time, if everything's about to collapse, there's also opportunities to do something new and different to push against what we have received. It's that, if it's all going to die, then we might as well have our last hurrah. So the collapse is sort of a fearful thing, but it's also a possibility, a suggestion of hope, a suggestion that if it collapses, maybe something better will emerge. So there's also an interest in utopias because of this. There's a big interest in Socialism. There's big strong movements towards Socialism and a burgeoning utopian storytelling in the literature.

But there's also, of course, worries about dystopias. So because of Darwin's ideas having really impacted the middle of the century, contemporaries said that by the 1870s, 1880s, you had to take a position on Darwin. So there was a collapsing belief about God and God determining the universe, Christianity being that sort of moral founding understanding of life and of gender and of family life and even imperial life, the British Empire. So with

that, many people took on that, yes, that Darwin was correct and there was this evolution. So then out of that, of course, emerges number one, ideas about eugenics, that we have to purify the race. If we're evolving, we have to make sure certain people breed with other people, which again connects to the Contagious Diseases Act. But there's also a corresponding fear about degeneration. So there was a book written that was very influential by a German physicist in the middle of that decade and he wrote about the degenerates and Wilde was taken as a key degenerate, Oscar Wilde, Ibsen. So anybody that was sort of pushing back against these received ideas were taken as this threat to, the whole of human history could degenerate. We could not just evolve, but we could devolve. So you see things like *The Time Machine* that speak to this, H.G. Wells. So there's all these sorts of things. So it's a real time of flux. It's a time where people can see that there might be possibility and hope, but there also is a threat. Good things may arise. And it is also very classed because there were many people who were the middle classes, the upper middle classes, who were concerned to see the Education Acts had brought, we'd have industrialization, urbanization. There was a huge urbanization taking place in London, a lot of deforestation, obviously, and London became this huge suburban sprawl. So there was a fear as well of these classed masses and poverty, all sorts of things.

So out of all of this arose this figure that was called the New Woman. So the New Woman was a phrase that was coined by Sarah Grand, who was a writer at the time and a journalist. And she discussed a woman that was wanting more independence. She was wanting political engagement. There was a push to educate young girls and women, not just from women, but from men as well. Thomas Hardy, for example, was really involved in this, very invested in ideas about marriage and women's place. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is seen as one of these women that she's not educated and therefore she becomes this fallen woman, his subtitle to that book. But she's innocent, that's his whole point, that she can't know. So the New Woman arises. There is the emergence of the bicycle. As I said, you could talk about the 1890s for ever. So women were wearing split skirts, they were cycling around, they like to go on these cycling tours. There was a lot of pushback against women being so unwomanly. But the New Woman was basically demanding a recognition of her intellect, more engagement politically, which again led to the rise of the suffragettes. And a lot of these women who were called New Women in the 1890s then became suffragettes in the early 1900s and became platform speakers, such as Sarah Grand, who coined the term New Woman. So she was wanting just more acknowledgement. She was very interested at the time in marriage and motherhood because this is, pre-contraception. So, that gives you some idea of what the New Woman was. So she was kind of this radical despised woman. There was a lot of pushback, there was a lot of backlash against these ideas and all of this change and the backlash and pushback against the dandies and the decadence, especially in 1895 after the trial of Oscar Wilde, everything became sort of more tense, more anxious because it seemed to some people that their fears and worries about what gender movements might cause were being realized. This is the disgusting depravity of this sort of story around homosexual identities.

AT: And so how did Mary Ward fit into this?

JB: So Mary Ward was an educated woman whose father was an academic and who also married an Oxford don. She wrote very popular novels. She came from a very well-established family connected to education and very well-known in London circles. So she was born into that. Her uncle was the poet Matthew Arnold. He was also very famous for his work on education and his interest in education throughout his lifetime. So she was very influenced by him. But her parents also, her father went through various conversions between Anglicanism and Catholicism. So she saw the outworking of that, which meant if you became a Catholic at that time, you couldn't work at Oxford. You had to subscribe to the 39 articles of the Anglican Church in order to work in that field. So she saw his religious progress as deeply threatening, like plunging the family into poverty. I like to think that we can reclaim Mary Ward because she was born in Tasmania, which is very exciting. So she was born in Tasmania while her father was working there. And then they moved back to England when she was a child. There is another very well-known woman writing on New Women, George Egerton at the time,

Mary Dunne. She was also born in Australia. So I'd like to reclaim her too, because it's very exciting to have these connections. There was also a lot of influence for George Egerton from Scandinavian writers. So the Scandinavian writers were seen as pretty controversial. So Mary Ward had a sort of difficult childhood because of the religious conflict between her parents. So she was very interested in Darwinian thought. She was really interested in how, the ways in which in a really everyday way, Darwin's ideas were conflicting with Christian ideas and forcing people to make changes, forcing people to reconsider their lives. It's hard for us to really comprehend, but this huge restructure of who you are in the world, what your purpose is, how and why you were born, and what it means after you die. It was very existential.

So she first rose to prominence by writing these books that were really focused on those religious issues. And predominantly, because she was educated, it was predominantly about the conflicts. For example, her book *Robert Elsmere*, which was published in 1888, was about an Anglican minister coming to accept and realise that the Bible wasn't literally true and that we needed to liberalise Christianity. So the interest there, and this is why it matters for the 1890s and how she wrote about the New Women, the interest there is in, "things are changing, but the changes are huge and they have potential massive ramifications. But we need to work out how we might be in the future." So she's really interested in how people can get their heads around this sort of really new way to be in the world and then what the implications are for the social world.

So she is quite progressive in that, when she's thinking about poverty, urbanisation, these sorts of things, Socialist aims and ideals, she was very interested in all these intellectual discourses going on at the time. She's really interested in looking at the fact that urbanisation itself has created various problems.

Industrialisation has created problems that if you suddenly put thousands of new people in London to run factories, there will be problems of poverty and violence and all sorts of issues that are caused by the external situation, not by the individual. So this is very different because the sort of traditional Christian, mid-Victorian tradition had been blaming the individual. So she had that very Socialist-oriented view that was much more about this is the conditions under which the individual is forced to live. So in sociology, we talk about that as a structural issue rather than an individual issue. And that was a really progressive thinking at the time.

AT: And so when she wrote *Marcella*, it came out in 1894. And my understanding is that it was extremely popular, but it's sort of been dismissed by critics. So can you tell us about that?

JB: Yeah, so *Marcella* is a book that is actually about a New Woman. It's about a young woman who it's about a young woman who is influenced by Socialism, lives in London for a while, knows some Socialists, joins their organisation, goes to the lectures, is very influenced by that. But then her father inherits her uncle's property and she becomes sort of a middling aristocrat. And it's her desire to change her community, and her compassion for the circumstances of people living in poverty and in terrible conditions on the property that her father now owns that, is really the focus of the book. So it's very much a Socialist agenda. She was recognised as a New Woman, *Marcella*. The reviews at the time all said that it was a radical book. Obviously, it got a lot of attention because she was already a best-selling author, but it was seen as a radical book talking about the radical New Woman. And really one of the key things that one of the reviewers said from the Times was that every young woman in England will read this book and get very excited recognising in its pages that "this is me. This is me, this is what I am thinking and this is what I am feeling." And I think just that comment in such a prestigious journal at the time is really significant because to me that says that it's really important to pay attention to what is being said in this book by this author, because that character was recognised as very much up with the New Woman, Socialist, progressive, very excitable, very keen to change the world, very keen to be politically involved, talking about Acts of Parliament, all sorts of things.

And yet we now hardly ever hear about this book. After the 1890s, Mary Ward was asked to be the president of the Anti-Suffrage League. So she agreed to do that and they basically wanted a female figurehead for that so that they could push back against the votes for women. And I think because she agreed to do that, even though that only lasted for a couple of years and then the men took over, the Men's Suffrage League and the

Women's Suffrage League joined up as one organisation and the men led it, her work in that regard was seen as such a betrayal of the feminist cause that the books that really started to look at the 1890s literature, which was in the 1970s, basically said "don't touch Mary Ward." Number one, because she was married to, she was a privileged woman, but number two, because she became the president of the Anti-Suffrage League.

AT: So she got cancelled?

JB: She did, effectively. She really did. And it's really interesting because I kept, when you first look at that literature from the 1970s, which was brilliant in re-establishing the place of the New Woman at that time, it was so consistent to say "don't read Mary Ward because, look, this is what she did." It was really, really interesting and that just made me curious. And so I thought, "I'm going to read Mary Ward." And I was so surprised and I guess that surprise has kept me being an advocate of her work because number one, I think there's various reasons why she became the president of the Anti-Suffrage League. She also ran into trouble with the men that were running it because she was too radical. So if you didn't know what had been said about her and you just found that book, you'd be like, "wow, what a radical woman. This must be a really radical writer. How amazing." And her depiction of the relationship and men and masculinities is what is also very radical compared to the other New Women writers. So that's the other reason I really advocate for reading Mary Ward. But I think the reasons about why she did that make her a much more interesting person to look at. I think that what happened was Mary Ward, number one, you could say that instead of, many of the people at the time who wanted change and wanted difference and were very keen to see perhaps things destroyed as they were and reestablished on different grounds, they wanted something that was more in the lines of a revolution, something radical and quick that destroyed everything and we could start again. So that's that kind of utopian hope. Mary Ward was very pragmatic. She was very interested and that's why I'm saying *Robert Elsmere*, when you read that book as well, she's so interested in the ideas that are floating around at the time and how the individual person might grapple with that and be brought along into a future that's changed. So she's looking at a changing future, like a social evolution that will continuously improve things. She thought that the best people needed to be involved in this social evolution, men and women. So the complexity of the position on suffrage was that she said that we didn't need votes for women because the national Parliament was only involved in military and trade ideas. So these were issues and the leadership of the nation, these were issues that were all not connected with women, as in women couldn't serve in the military and things like that, that's what her, women weren't part of this organising structure, so therefore they didn't need to be part of that. And then she said, "but women should be able to vote locally and women should be able to be representatives locally." So it was always a really contradictory position and the men who were leading it and invited her in didn't like her saying this, because they wanted a hardline position of, definitely not.

And another, I think one of the reasons was she also herself as an individual, and funnily enough, this is where I connect her a bit with Ursula Le Guin, she enjoyed a really positive marriage. She married an intellectual man who respected her intellectual pursuits, who supported all her social work. She founded two settlement colonies, like these are huge organisations to provide services for people, including things like housing, clothing, really supporting people. They provided lectures, they provided education, they were basically like a community house. And one of these still exists in London, and it's now called Mary Ward House. It was renamed after her death. So she had a supportive partner that supported all of this work. And she was actually, creating huge amounts of change and was very energetically involved with that. And one of the arguments about not getting the vote was that you wouldn't have time because of all the new opportunities that had already opened up for women, that they wouldn't have time separate to all that social servicing, and all of that, the local work that they were doing to be worried about this, what's going on with the military. So I think it's really interesting that, it's very easy to say she was president of the Anti Suffrage League, which I think is terrible,

obviously, I'm not a fan. But if you look into what was actually going on and why, I think actually, it was very

much about her individual biography. I think it was about the fact that she had a lot of freedom to do what she felt was necessary and important in the world, which was the sort of quasi-Socialist causes of bringing the classes together, educating people, helping people with housing, alleviating poverty, alleviating issues like domestic violence, all of this work that she was deeply involved in doing and all this committee work and establishing two settlements. She had all this freedom and support and recognition for that. And I think her real blind spot was she couldn't understand really, that other women may not have an experience, anything like that. I think it was basically, in summary, a very classed response. It wasn't understanding the sorts of issues that other women might be facing. It was a privileged response.

AT: It's fascinating to me how fast feminists will often cancel women who they see as not being feminist enough or not correctly feminist. But then we don't see nearly as much pushback when we're talking about all of the other problematic aspects. So like when you look at American suffragists who were just blatantly racist. I was working on something about the Famous Five, who were Canadian women who basically challenged in court, "are women considered a person under this law that would have allowed them to join the Senate?" And instantly, the Canadian Supreme Court said no. But then the Privy Council said yes. So thanks, Britain, for that one. But literally, like all five of these women who were, phenomenal activists and everything, they were all, to a one of them, eugenicists. These are very problematic people. But it seems like a lot of times we're willing to overlook the racism, the classism, the ableism, all the other -isms, as long as you are what I consider to be a "good feminist."

JB: And I think that's why history matters so much, right? Because we have an historic moment that says "to be a feminist equals this, to be a feminist equals that." And it was the same in the 1970s when women were looking at this. And what astounded me when I read her, and then I read some of the other new women writers, like Sarah Grand was very lauded in the 1990s. It was like "Sarah Grand, wow, look at her. She's radical. She's amazing." Now, I do think Sarah Grand was radical and amazing. And reading her journalism is quite incredible. Often you think, "wow, you could republish that now. And it could be read now," which is sort of depressing. But just it's a reminder to be humble as well, that we're not better and superior because we're living 100 years after these women. But Sarah Grand's eugenics was very evident and problematic. And that's only been written about more recently. So it was like, "oh, Sarah Grand's wonderful." And yet Ward was dismissed because of something she did 15 years later for two years. And I agree with you, I think that whole thing of ignoring certain aspects, because we want to have an ideal image of a foremother. I think it's problematic, because we actually need the complex picture. I think the complex pictures are more interesting. I think the black and white pictures, because when you were talking, I thought you were going to talk about men as well, because it's very easy to just lump any group of people into this homogenous whole and say "these people are okay, and these people are not." And those sort of black and white simplistic dichotomies are, I think, part of the problem in the sorts of conversations we still have now.

So yeah, I think it's really important to look at, like take someone on their merits. And if this is an amazing, like *Marcella* itself is a really great book that tells you so much about the period and so much about the thought and the thinking and I guess the complexity of it, because to me it was so reductive of her intellectual engagement. And it is quite interesting what she's saying about the kind of New Woman and all her intellectual pursuits that are pushing against this idea inherently of empire. I mean, the man who's an aristocrat that falls for Marcella says, "oh, you'll make sure that none of us have houses in the future and, that none of us have our properties and none of us, this will all be gone in the future." And that's exactly what people were talking about, a future that was more equitable, a future that was more about shared communal support rather than the wealthy and then the poor who are maligned and told that they're poor because of their own fault. I mean, basically her New Man, they do get together, but then they break up because she advocates against the gaming laws, which would have a poacher on his property killed for poaching. And it's a man who's trying to support his family, who's disabled. And she's saying, "you can't, it's not his fault. This is why he's done this. Like, look at this

person and the situation the person's in and the law is wrong. There's a problem with the law." And she goes off to London and works as a nurse with the poor. So you get a really strong sense of, what the situation was like on the ground at that time.

AT: And she does end up with him anyway, in the end. But like after, after she's had a chance to go out and grow and evolve as a person, and they still end up together in the end.

JB: Yeah, but I guess what I find interesting about that is he is also represented as flawed. So she's represented as needing to learn about, it's a bildungsroman really, about what her life can be, what her capacity can be in her Socialist aims. But he's also represented as flawed. He's accepting that things are changing. But he's resisting it. And it's the pushback that she's representing through these two characters that I think is a really interesting insight into the sorts of debates that were going on at the time and how people were thinking about what the future might, a lot of people were acknowledging the future has to change, but how can it change and what should it look like? These are issues that we're grappling with now, right? So, this is how, when you read these things, you realise how important it is to read something that sort of mirrors a contemporary moment. Like it would be useful for anybody to read a very popular novel of our period, because if it resonates with people, then it's saying something about that contemporary moment and it can really give you great insight into it. So I hate the thought that people don't read that work because they've been told, "don't read her, don't even touch her because she did this."

AT: I mean, she's long dead. She's not going to know if you read her or not. You're not hurting her anymore. Just read it. (laughter) But one of the things that I find interesting about your scholarship is that a lot of your analysis has been looking at this gender dynamic of how Ward is modelling the male characters and their role in enabling and empowering New Womanhood. And one of the things that you point out is that male sexuality in the works of writers like Sarah Grand and George Egerton, they often present like the desirable partner as men who are not sexual. And I think we're getting into this issue of, a lot of men who, to be fair, these are the kind of men whose opinions I don't really care about. But you do get men who have this idea that, "well, feminists think that we have to be castrated," essentially, for women to be empowered, which is just ridiculous. And so it's really interesting that you have women who were writing about the New Woman who were playing into that mindset that to lift women up, we have to push men down. And Mary Ward was very much not falling into that trap, shall we say.

JB: Yeah. So that's the other reason I found her amazing because what you find is a lot of New Woman writers writing New Woman books find it very hard to imagine a partner for her. What kind of partner can the New Woman have? What kind of relationship is going to work? And because there's this idea that evolution promoted of the bestial male, because if we're all animals, then we've got this bestial male sexuality. So that sexuality in itself becomes quite frightening as well. I think this is part of what's fueling this representation. So we get a lot of men who are obviously supposed to be New Men in the books of the writers of the time, but they're desexualized. They're really weak. They're pathetic. They're often artists, and often they're dying or they do die. They die of consumption often. So they're very desexualized. They're not threatening in any way. And I think what's really interesting, and then you've got the "old" man, the alternative man of the past, who's just about the patriarchal power man. And you seem to see these two tropes going throughout that literature. "This is the men. Oh, we want a man that's much more gentle, that's not patriarchal, that can connect with women, that often has a really good friendship with a New Woman like this New Man." We have a really good friendship with a New Woman, but the New Women find it really difficult to give him a sexuality.

AT: I'm just wondering, is this the origin of the overly feminized gay best friend trope?

JB: It might be. It might be. I mean, the idea of the artist. Yeah, it's a very interesting thing when you trace it, this idea of this desexualized artist or this consumptive man who can be this great friend for women. So there's obviously this desire for connection and friendship, isn't there? But it's like this dilemma of what do you do with his sexuality? Yeah. So I guess that's how the gay friend is supposed to be a substitute for that, isn't it?

So Mary Ward, she provides an alternative and her alternative is actually to look at the most powerful men of the time. So she writes about two men in particular that I look at in her works of the 1890s. She writes about Aldous Raeburn in *Marcella* and in the sequel, *Sir George Tressady*. And then she writes about Helbeck of Bannisdale in a book of the same name. And these are both men who are aristocrats.

So they're the most privileged men of their time, but they're both represented as having a sexuality, embracing a sexuality and also desiring above all a New Woman. And I find that really, really interesting. And I think it's a departure from the sorts of storying of men that other New Women were doing. And again, that was one of the things that struck me when I did read Ward. It's like, "well, hang on, she seems to work with this dilemma in a different way." And again, I think this is influenced by her own experience. I think she had a positive experience and it's represented in her work. And it does contrast with a number of other New Women writers who, like Sarah Grand, for instance, was married at 16 to a widower who was 40. And he worked with the army as a medical officer. So that's how she got all her information about syphilis. She was reading medical textbooks, but she became stepmother to a 12- and 11-year-old boys when she was 16, had a child with him, lived with him for 20 years and raised their son. And then that wasn't even her birth name. She then left Ireland, re-emerged in London as calling herself Madam Sarah Grand and set up life as a writer. And she ended up mayoress of Bath down at the end of her life. But she didn't have a partnership. And George Egerton as well had a lot of relationships with men and broken love affairs and things that she found difficult. But again, I think that the fact that they are struggling to find a man that can be a good mate to the New Woman is really instructive. And I think Ward finds this New Man, but she finds it in an unexpected place.

And I guess you could read that as, oh, well, that's a regressive thing to think about these people that are gentry. But the other way to read it is, these are the most powerful men in the society of the time. So these are men who are, really powerful and educated and yet what they most desire is a New Woman. And the New Woman, it's to be an intellectual equal. It's to push against him. She represents these relationships as very intellectual, like they're very much debates and discussions, and it's not a simpering kind of femininity. It's a really radical, mouthy, strong, educated, interested, engaged, pushing her own ideas against his ideas. And I think she presents him as needing to master his own privilege, I guess we'd say now, and his own sexuality in order to be good enough for her. So she's doing it in both directions. I think what she's doing with power in those relationships is really interesting. And I think it really departs from a lot of the other writers at the time.

AT: And so something that I find really fascinating about this even today is it's not a question of, "oh, it's all about, she gets married in the end and that's her happy ending and a man finds her attractive. And that's," it's not about that. It's about the balance. It's that she is choosing him. He is choosing her, for their own reasons. And with clear eyes, like they understand who the other person is. They're not going into this naively, because as you were saying, one of the core issues of the New Woman is that this innocence hurts women. I feel like even today with what we now know as toxic masculinity, I feel like that's something that they were touching on, this idea that they were thinking that "masculinity" in the way that it was displayed and perceived is this, strong, horny, powerful man. "That is masculinity." And I feel like they were looking at the idea that masculinity itself was toxic, which we know is not the case. And so Mary Ward was saying, "masculinity is not toxic. It doesn't have to be toxic. You can have a man who meets these criteria for manliness, but who is also aware enough, intelligent enough, open enough to respect that the woman can also be strong in the relationship. It's not one of us or the other of us, we can be strong together." Because that's, as you said, that's what she saw in her own life that a lot of women just didn't have.

JB: Yeah, I think it's a reflective masculinity. And I think the key thing is, as I said, that both of them have to

change. Yeah, that both people are changing to understand each other to grow together. So there's this new form of womanhood. And instead of rejecting that, because these women were considered unwomanly, like they were really rejected. Women riding on bicycles were having things thrown at them, like it was considered disgusting and abhorrent that they had a split skirt and things. So they were rejected as unwomanly and nobody would want to marry such a woman. And the idea of the New Man really emerged as a joke in the cartoons of the period saying, "Oh yes, I suppose this is the new man," the New Woman standing there saying, "Oh, can I carry your bag, sir?" And so he's being mocked as weak and pathetic. "Oh, this is the New Man that the New Woman needs. So basically a reversal. And that's the very simplistic thing, isn't it? The first step is this idea of reversal.

And I think we still go through this today, that we think of reversal. Whereas I think she's got a very humanistic vision. She's got a vision that's not so focused on that obsessing over gender. And she's more interested in, despite power arrangements and traditions that we've inherited, how might two people come together and how might the New Woman be accommodated and how might a New Man have enough space to develop as well to be a heterosexual friend to the New Woman? Cause I agree with you. I think there was a lot of, like the *Yellow Book* that emerged in the 1890s, which was a periodical that was really popular at the time, that had a lot of New Women writers and a lot of queer writers. And there was a lot of decadence and stuff associated with that. So there was this connection of New Women and the decadence and the queers and the aesthetes and things, but where was the space for a heterosexual masculinity? So that was kind of being pushed aside and she's showing how this might be possible. Whereas George Gissing, who wrote another George Gissing, who actually was a man rather than a George who was a woman, George Gissing wrote another brilliant book about that really shows so much about the period called *The Odd Women*. And he tries to represent a New Man who does go head to head with a New Woman, but in the end, he decides it's too hard to marry her. It's too hard to be with this New Woman and he marries a traditional woman. So I think people are trying to imagine what masculinity might emerge to be a really adequate heterosexual marriage relationship with a New Woman. And I think she grapples with this in a really interesting way.

AT: And when we're talking about some of the things that they were talking about then, unfortunately are still issues today. You still see people insulting men by implying that they are feminine, by implying that they are weak, which often seems to be tied to the gender constructs around masculinity and femininity. So things like men being emotionally vulnerable, men crying, men talking about their feelings, all things that from a psychological standpoint just seem healthy to someone like me, but these are still so deeply entrenched with stigma around men being, what is considered in that construct to be weakness.

JB: Yes. And I think that whole idea about power is very interesting because you could also say that the men who are enabled to have more flexibility in their masculinity are men who are already more powerful. So what we find today, for example, I've also done research on single fatherhood. And so the movements and constructions around fatherhood, we find that men who tend to stay home and spend time caring full time for their own children, for example, well, for a start, there's always been working class men where that's just a norm, where it's shift work and shared arrangements of parenting. But for men who are more educated, they've already established themselves in their careers and then they tend to take off time, which actually increases their status. So it's still very connected to power arrangements rather than that there's as much vulnerability for, in fatherhood as there is in motherhood. So it's still considered to contribute to the construction of power for a man to take on looking after his children. It's not a normalized thing. So I think it's really interesting when you're mapping, it's very hard to talk 130 years later, but all of those engagements with power and how men get constructed around that, I think are still very pertinent today. I agree.

AT: When we're talking about, it's not just that she got married at the end of *Marcella*, there was also a sequel that, because of the popularity of *Marcella*, she actually had to leave London to escape the crowds when the



sequel came out. But the sequel is actually digging more into their marriage. So it's not just "here's your happy ending wedding." It's, "okay, now we're actually going to look at the state of things in this situation."

JB: Yeah, so I think the sequel is interesting because she really then is looking at the scope that women of a particular class could have for influence and power. And that's really what she's looking at because Aldous becomes an MP and Marcella and he work together to push bills, to alleviate poverty and to basically support union movements and things like this, to unionize so that conditions are better in minds on people's properties and things. So I think it's really interesting that the book, like people began to call girls "Marcella." New Women were labelled Marcella. She was such a popular heroine, this heroine of this novel that Ward felt she had to write a sequel. And so it was due to public demand that she wrote a sequel and she wrote this sequel that really went into their marriage, but also represented an alternative marriage in the marriage of *Sir George Tressady* to show how marriage can go wrong and the sorts of problems and issues that marriage can have. So again, it's just advancing these ideas about how partnerships might work and how men and women might construct partnerships together in that to-ing and fro-ing and development and reflection and that willingness to be vulnerable to one another that leads to mutual growth. And she shows what might happen if that doesn't happen. And that's really what she's doing in that second book and also looking at the scope of power for women of her class at that time.

AT: So I have to admit, when we were talking about why she was doing the anti-suffrage thing, obviously I think we can agree there were flaws in her logic about Parliament only is concerned with military and trade. And I thought that this maybe was just someone who didn't understand how Parliament works, but if she's written this whole other book about how a woman and her husband who is an MP could influence things and change things for the better through Parliament, that argument just seems even more nonsensical.

JB: Yeah. Look, I agree with you. And I think it's very much then about that idea of separate spheres that still persists and it persists in all the New Women books. Because women were able to start to work, but middle-class and upper-class women, that notion of marriage and motherhood, they were the key norms for what women could do. So that's why the New Women were looking at, "what can we do within marriage and motherhood and how can we critique and address and call out the problems in marriage and motherhood," such as syphilitic, the two different ideals for men and women pre-marriage and things like this. So I think that separate spheres thing comes in here because it was very much seen as these masses in London, the increased poverty, urbanization, all of these issues, the construction of settlement houses, the running of education programs, the support for women and families in all of that, was very much what Socialist women were doing. And men. But this is very much the scope, that women's lives broadened out to include this kind of activity that was advancing and supporting "social betterment," in their terms.

So I think they saw that as a really significant important sociological aim. There was settlement sociology that developed out of that, that they were collecting information, addressing poverty, examining poverty, researching poverty, alleviating poverty and that that then had to filter up, I guess in the way that we might think about you have policy writers and then you have MPs. Somebody's got to be on the ground to collect the information and somebody then can use the information to change things for the better. And I think again because of Ward's privileged personal position, she felt that this was consistent with being unable to vote herself because she had so much, she represents the woman having so much influence. Like basically they grapple with a thing intellectually, that's a whole lot of what *Marcella* is about, to come to an agreed position. And so therefore he can represent what she thinks and believes and what she wants to see changed in Parliament.

AT: It's fascinating that it just never occurred to her that you can cut out the middleman. (JB: Yeah.) And it's like well just get the social workers into Parliament and then they can do the work directly or instead of influencing

your husband who is an MP, you could be the MP. And I do wonder how much of it, it just wouldn't have occurred to her that that was a good thing or even a possible thing?

JB: Yeah it's hard to get your head around. I think an indication of how much power she had, like she was born into a really well-known family, the Arnolds were really well-known. She's the aunt of Aldous Huxley who wrote *Brave New World*. Her family were very well-known and the President of the United States in the First World War contacted her personally to ask her to go to the Western Front to report on the war. And she was one of the only female and maybe the first female journalists to go to the Western Front, witness what was going on and write to inform America of the status of the war. So she had a lot of power and privilege and I guess this is where my thinking is at the moment about trying to understand how she could get to that position. As you said from writing this book *Marcella* that's really radical, Fabian Socialist to 15 years later becoming head of the Anti-Suffrage League. Like how do all these things fit together? So at the moment that's where my thinking is about that. I think it's a blind spot and I think it's based on privilege.

AT: I mean it's also fascinating, the idea that she would have gone to war when she's arguing that, "oh war has nothing to do with women." Like that just seems incredibly, I don't want to say dumb, but it's dumb. I'm sorry, it's dumb. Because apart from all the women who do serve in wars not necessarily as soldiers but in other capacities. Which you know if anybody wants to go listen to my conversation with Bianca Taubert on that one, we talk all about women in war, specifically British women. But that's not even getting into like the women who are left behind, the women who are widowed, who are left with orphan children and now they have to be both the breadwinner and the homemaker and take care of their kids. And again not even getting into men who are sent home with trauma, with physical disabilities. Like the idea that "oh Parliament is concerned with the military and that's not in any way impacting on women. The decisions that they're making about the military have nothing to do with women." It's just breathtaking to me.

[Listen to Bianca Taubert on the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps](#) or [read the transcript](#).

JB: Yeah and I don't think she thought that it had nothing to do with women.

But she thought that the spheres that were local and what could be done locally was such a massive, there was such a huge job to be done. I guess it goes back to that idea of what how quickly things changed. Like if you read about anything about urbanization in London at that time, like it was really freaking people out. Industrialization, the whole movement of all these people into the city, creating huge amounts of issues. Like massive, massive, deplorable, unbelievable issues. She felt that people working on that local level had so much work to do. It was more about, somebody does this task and somebody does this task and somebody else does this task. Because of course even most obviously women give birth to soldiers. So yes she was very interested in motherhood. And that's what the Anti-Suffrage League said actually, that women are so have so many other things to do that they can't additionally take on this. I think it was more that sense of, which could just be justifying it of course, but that sense of what the tasks were in terms of social advancement, what needed to be done, what power they already had. Part of the argument of the Anti-Suffrage League was that they actually were listened to because they were founding and very involved in the settlement movement, things like this and social movements that had been created by urbanization. That they were listened to more outside of Parliament than if they were inside Parliament because they were seen as maternal. So they were seen as particularly able to empathize and understand suffering. And they were also seen as neutral. So they weren't seen as aligned politically. So therefore they had a hearing and that was part of the argument, that there was a particular emphasis given to the voices of women saying this. And again this is very much about certain women, isn't it? It's privileged women. Who's going to be listened to? It's really not talking to the masses of women. It's not talking to women beyond that, is it? But privileged women who were very involved in these organizations, who were educated and educated about poverty and in these movements were educating others. They were part of an education movement. They were lecturing. That those women were specifically listened to because they were seen as being able to represent communities and because they were seen as

neutral, that they weren't just running a particular political line. They were concerned for people rather than just running a political line.

AT: The idea that you're not on one political side or the other you're fighting for something that is seen as being separate from-

JB: Yeah beyond politics and more important and I think we still have that happen now where we say certain organizations, they won't be politically aligned because they believe without political alignment they'll have a better voice to represent a particular group and to get change to happen.

AT: Or not happen in the case of the anti-suffragists. So fundamentally it feels like what you're arguing for in reclaiming Mary Ward in the history of women's literature and particularly feminist literature is, being flawed should not mean that someone is disregarded and their work is ignored.

JB: Yeah and I think also an individual work should be taken on its own merits. So if you took her name off *Marcella* and you gave somebody *Marcella* and you gave somebody *The Beth Book* that was written by Sarah Grand and you gave somebody *Keynotes* that was written by George Egerton, you'd see things of interest for New Women and New Women writers in that period in all of those works. She later wrote books that were more anti-suffrage even though she had a suffragette sister which is really interesting. But I guess I'm saying for a time, if you read this book that was so popular at that time, if you fail to read that book you don't learn as much about that particular period in history, that moment in history. And yes we can all be flawed and yes our thinking can all change in all different directions but I like the thought that writing itself can be judged on its own merits. That returning to *Marcella* and for a moment putting aside what Mary Ward did because I sound like I'm trying to justify what she did after that. That's not my position. I'm just trying to get my head around how did she get from there to there because it doesn't make a lot of sense to me either. But I want the work judged on its own merits and I think that work like *Marcella* and *Helbeck* and *Sir George Tressady*, I think they have particularly interesting things to say not just about New Womanhood but about new masculinities that by ignoring them, we're ignoring a whole other argument that is actually evident in that period because of that idea of, if you like cancellation. We'll cancel her because she said and did something wrong further down the track.

AT: Well and I think something that really needs to be delineated when we're talking about cancel culture, because I do believe that people are not entitled to be supported by fans if they are awful human beings. Like I think that is actually a core capitalist idea, is that no one is required to buy your album or your new book or whatever it is. But what we're talking about here is not "don't buy Harry Potter merch because JK Rowling is a TERF and you are literally giving her money." Mary Ward is long dead, like she is not making any money off of this book anymore. She is not benefiting in any way and, like you said, like it's history. There is a place that this book sits in history and it has value in that context. (JB: Yes.) And so I would argue that there is no point to canceling her. There is a point to saying "I'm not going to buy Harry Potter merch because I don't want to give JK Rowling money because she is harmful to people." I can see a point there but I can't see a point to just saying "we don't like her, so don't read her book even though she's been dead for many decades."

JB: There has there has been one other person, Beth Sutton-Ramspeck, who who argued for her from the late '90s to say, "yeah she's she's more radical than people have realised." And I guess you know the other part of it is, I'm super grateful to my feminist foremothers of the 1970s for finding this literature, because if they hadn't reinvigorated our interest in the 1890s for feminist literature and feminist history, I never would have got to those works myself. I would have read all the classic traditionalists that, like, in the 1890s who do we read? We read the men. We read Thomas Hardy. We read HG Wells. But perhaps also because I've only touched on a few New Woman writers - there was so many New Woman writers. The New Woman was the thing of the decade. She was very popular. The New Woman books sold a lot of copies. So there was a lot of writing on the

New Woman. So perhaps the first of the feminists that went back to read that were like, you've only got so much time in your life, in a day, in your scholarship, so focus on these ones. But as I say, I think it's really good that over time, and that's what happens with everything, over time there's been more critique of some of those writers that were hailed as fantastic back back then and more concern about, as you say, things like racism, eugenics in particular and ableism that's really, really welcome. So I think it's also just about history, isn't it, that we gradually unpack more and more. And that possibly Mary Ward will be one of these people that people do now start to think about, return to and see as significant, as you say in that historic moment. Like it's really important to understand the 1890s, to read the most popular books of the 1890s and the most popular books about New Women. I think hers was the best-selling if not second best-selling after *The Heavenly Twins* by Sarah Grand, so it's really significant to read it, to understand that that period in history.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.