

## “The Perilous Act of Lecturing”

### Clara Lucas Balfour 1808 – 1878, Prolific Travelling Lecturer

Clara Lucas Balfour was my great, great grandmother. When I needed a subject for an M.Ed dissertation, my father, who had an interest in family history, suggested studying her work.

Besides what can be found in public records, I have some relics which have passed down the family, most importantly, five engagement diaries, and 120 letters, mostly to her son, John, my great grandfather.

I pronounce her name Claire’a, not Clar’a, because that is how it was always said in the family.

Her life is of interest for several reasons:

She came from a far from privileged background, and was largely self-educated, so she is an excellent example of self-help. For three decades, in the middle of the nineteenth century, she pursued a successful career as a lecturer, travelling over much of England, and occasionally Wales, with at least one visit to Ireland. She sometimes spoke to very large audiences, and was frequently invited back to the same Institutions, showing that even in the mid nineteenth century, a determined woman could do a great deal more than we conventionally suppose. Her work, and the records she kept, also throw light on the workings of Mechanics’ Institutes from an unusual aspect.

Clara was born in December 1808 somewhere in the South of Hampshire, near Gosport. She was almost certainly illegitimate, but her father, John Lucas, a reasonably prosperous cattle dealer and butcher, acknowledged her, made much of her, and when she was about five, took her to live with him on a farm in the Isle of Wight. She could already read, and there got a little schooling. However, John Lucas lost his money and died in 1818, and Clara was returned to her mother, of whom very little is known, but she seems to have been a strict and perhaps a bitter woman. Money was short; they travelled to London, and lived apparently by needlework. Clara even had a few further terms at a boarding school, but this came to an end in 1822, when Clara, aged thirteen, had to leave school to help her mother.<sup>1</sup>

So, after her early childhood, her background was difficult, yet it does stand out that both parents encouraged some sort of education for their daughter. Books were somehow obtained. When in London, it is said, Clara carried a book with her when sent on errands, and was known as “that girl who is always reading”.<sup>1</sup>

The next known fact is startling. On September 29<sup>th</sup>, 1824, when she was not quite sixteen, she married James Balfour, who was then aged 28. Family legend has it that she eloped. If she married to escape poverty, she did not succeed. James had been in the Navy, but only as a “boy, third class” the lowest rating there was. He had seen service in the Mediterranean, and survived a shipwreck in the Gulf of St Lawrence. Soon after Waterloo, he apparently deserted, and for many years afterwards, both before and after his marriage, he seems to have drifted from job to job, being at various times described as locksmith, mattress-maker, and marine store keeper. He was also a drinker – probably not an actual alcoholic, but drinking enough to affect the family fortunes, and certainly to trouble his wife.

During the first ten years of her marriage, Clara had four children who survived infancy. Much later she wrote of these years as “years of trial”, but typically she added that without those troubles, “I never could have been nerved for fighting the world and winning as I have done.”

She began to supplement the family income by writing, though nothing from this time has survived. She somehow obtained work as proof-reader for the prestigious London and Westminster Review. And she still managed, somehow, to collect books.

In 1837, the Temperance movement, which had started in the north of England, spread to London, and first James, then Clara, took the Pledge, becoming lifelong Temperance advocates. It is easy now to mock the early Temperance movement, but it must have been the means of saving many families from a downward slide into poverty. It seems to have done so for the Balfours.

Not long after this, when James Balfour was working actively for the cause, addressing open-air meetings, Clara began to speak to smaller, women’s gatherings. In 1840, the Balfours made the acquaintance of John Dunlop. At this date, the majority of teetotallers were working class – the movement was derided or disapproved of by the middle and upper classes, but Dunlop, a Scot, was an exception. He had a law degree from Glasgow University, but came into a small inheritance, gave up the law, moved to London, and devoted himself to Temperance and other causes. James Balfour was engaged by the British and Foreign Temperance Society to assist Dunlop in collecting information on drinking usages – those customs which made consumption of alcohol almost compulsory on many occasions. Dunlop soon called on James at his lodgings, and met Clara, leaving in his diary a vivid account of his impressions.

I found two little boys playing in a large room off the court, filled with old iron and other gear. . the children directed me up a dark stair . . . at the top was a young woman on her hands and knees, washing the floor . . . she rose without confusion, received me civilly [and} ushered me into what was dining room and kitchen both, a good-sized room, but extremely dark . . . there was a large fireplace and a tea-kettle on the hob . . . a great space of the walls was covered with shelves, and well-filled with books; it was like a regular student’s library; the volumes were well-arranged. . . . These still she kept safe among the wreck of their affairs. <sup>2</sup>

Dunlop was in no doubt that the books belonged to Clara, not James.

In the next few years, Dunlop gave Clara a good deal of help and encouragement. He introduced her to Jane Carlyle who was his cousin and he got her paid work as co-editor of the Temperance Journal. The question, whether it was acceptable for women to speak in public, was being discussed among some of Dunlop’s friends, a debate in which Clara took part. Dunlop recorded in his diary that he had advised that, “she should proceed to lecture on literature as well as Temperance, and to the public too. Women are not to be underlings for ever.”

In October, 1841, she gave her first publicly advertised lecture. A little later, Dunlop heard her speak in Woolwich, to an audience of about 400.

She was more than equal to it, *he wrote*, it was without notes. She will acquire the swinging “abandon” of public speaking in time . . . The subject was the capacities of women. I do not regret having encouraged her.

Soon after this she was invited by the Leeds Temperance Society, to give three lectures at the Mechanics’ Institute there, only one of which was on Temperance.

From now on, although she continued to lecture sometimes on Temperance, by far the greater number of Balfour's lectures were on other subjects, mostly in the areas of Literature and History. A common element was the position and education of women, their achievement in the past, and the ways women were represented in Literature. Her most popular lecture was variously called "Female Influence", "The Influence of Women on Society" or "The Influence and Education of Women." It is referred to ten times in her diaries, up to 1869, when she delivered it in Shepton Mallet. It is, in addition, described in a number of newspapers, and it is very fully paraphrased in the diary of Caroline Fox, who first heard Clara lecture in Falmouth in October, 1849.

Fox is an important witness to Clara's work. She was an unmarried daughter of a distinguished Quaker family, with many friends among the intellectuals of the day. Her paraphrase shows that Balfour criticised the education offered to women as "a culture of the surface." She refuted the arguments commonly made at the time that education would be harmful to women, distract them from their duties, or make them vain and pedantic. Good mental training, she argued, was needed to "take cognizance of moral questions." She advocated an equality of esteem, as, "whenever woman is either the idol or the slave, instead of the helpmeet of man, the sin and shame react abundantly on himself." She believed that there were indeed differences between the sexes, but "that one sex is inferior to the other has yet to be proved." She referred to women in Scripture, (a subject she later wrote a book about) to prove that "women can do and suffer as signally as men."

She was not aggressive or assertive, but argued persistently that women were under-rated and under-educated, and that this was bad for them and for society as a whole. A report of this lecture in the Leeds Mercury said, "she strenuously maintained the position, . . . of which, indeed, she afforded a striking proof – that woman possesses high intellectual capabilities."

Other lectures described female characters in English Literature, linking the representation of women in the literature of in a period, and their actual status at the time. She developed lectures on Female Writers, Female Sovereigns, Queens of England, Remarkable Women, etc. These topics could be expanded into a course of six lectures, as we see from these courses given in parallel, in Liverpool and Manchester in 1846.

Sept 30 <sup>th</sup>	Female Influence I	Liverpool		
Oct 3 <sup>rd</sup>	Female Influence II	Liverpool		
Oct 7 <sup>th</sup>	Female Writers I	Liverpool		
Oct 8 <sup>th</sup>			Female Influence I	Manchester
Oct 10 <sup>th</sup>	Female Writers II	Liverpool		
Oct 14 <sup>th</sup>	Female Sovereigns I	Liverpool		
Oct 15 <sup>th</sup>			Female Influence II	Manchester
Oct 17 <sup>th</sup>	Female Sovereigns II	Liverpool		
Oct 20 <sup>th</sup>			Female Writers I	Manchester
Oct 21 <sup>st</sup>			Female Writers II	Manchester

After the first of these, she wrote to her son from lodgings in Liverpool,

Last night I went, accompanied by Dr. Reid and Mrs. Hugo Reid to the Institution. I was trembling and cold with anxiety and alarm when I went, and I thought I must fail, but no sooner had I entered the splendid Lecture Hall, four times as large as the London Mechanics', and magnificently lighted up, quite filled with a large, respectable-looking audience; no sooner had I entered than I felt quite animated, and equal to my task. They

received me enthusiastically, and listened most attentively, and I believe I made a good impression. “

The reference to Mrs. Hugo Reid is particularly interesting, as Reid had recently published *A Plea for Women*, a book which made a powerful and cogent argument for the extension of the franchise to women.

Balfour developed, during her career, literary topics, especially poetry, the study of biography, and historical subjects, John Knox, Henry VIII etc. As late as 1869, she was still planning new subjects, such as French Women of Letters, English Women of Letters, and Reading as an Intellectual Recreation.

Many historians say that women did not speak in public in the early or mid nineteenth century. It is easy to find evidence that the few who did so were disapproved of. When The National Association for the Promotion of Social Science, opened its platform to women speakers in 1857, it was mocked in the press as the Universal Palaver Association, dealing with “the problem of Female loquacity.” At a Social Science Congress in 1864, Emily Davies, no less, had a paper read for her by a man.

Surprisingly, though I have trawled a good many local newspapers from all over the country, I have found no evidence of such an attitude to Clara Balfour; in the early years reporters regarded her as a novelty, and perhaps as an exception to the rule. Words such as “modesty”, “manners” “decorum” and “propriety” recur in descriptions of her. There is general agreement that she had a pleasant voice and good delivery. She could evidently make herself heard, by large audiences, without shouting or shrillness (charges still sometimes brought against women speakers.)

Here are a few comments:

Leeds Intelligencer: 1842

However much the “lords of creation” might feel disposed to ridicule and condemn the public teaching of a woman, few could have listened to the charming eloquence of Mrs. Balfour without having such a feeling of disapprobation superseded by one of praise, at least so far as she was concerned.

Reading Mercury: 1845

No one who . . . remarked the strict propriety and decorum with which every part of the proceedings was conducted, would for a moment hesitate to countenance and support the talented speaker.

From the Liverpool Mercury: 1846

The lecture (that described in Balfour’s letter quoted earlier) was delivered in a modest, unaffected manner . . . Mrs. Balfour has made a most favourable impression on the minds of the audience, and she has proved, beyond doubt, that woman can lecture with ease, manners and propriety to public audiences.

This reporter added, “the substance of the lecture was extremely good; the reasoning close and convincing; the illustrations apt and admirable” so there was more to admire than her voice and manners!

Caroline Fox used the striking phrase which gave me a title for this talk, “even in the perilous act of lecturing, the lady did not unsex herself.”<sup>3</sup>

Balfour was not, in fact, the only woman to lecture at these Institutes, but she was by far the most active, in the length of her career, the amount she travelled, and the number and variety of her lectures.

## MAP I

This map itself is not complete; I find more places where she lectured from time to time.

From her diaries and letters, we can gain an idea of what was involved in such a career.

Planning and organising free-lance lecture tours was complicated, requiring separate negotiations with each institute.

Her home base was London; in November, 1848 she wrote to her son, John, who was working in Leeds,

I am now able to speak with some certainty of my visit to Yorkshire. I am going to Nottingham and Derby the first week in February, and I shall come on to Leeds whether I have engagements or not.

Halifax and Selby I believe I shall visit. My stay cannot be long, as I am engaged in London the first week in March.

So some Institutions had a firm programme three or four months ahead, others did not.

In fact, the early months of 1849 became very busy, and she wrote in May,

I shall be very, very glad when the present season is over. I have not managed so well, to have so many distant, fatiguing and expensive journeys, and another season I will (DV) make very different arrangements.

All this involved, of course, a great deal of correspondence. The end pages of Clara's diaries are full of names and addresses from all over the country. In 1848 she complains, "I am very busy today, having had no less than ten letters by this morning's post – most of them requiring replies – and yet none of them very satisfactory." And in 1863 she was, "Tormented . . . having nearly three dozen letters to write."

There was no central organization, and lecturers had to negotiate separately with each Institution. James Hole, who published an "Essay" on the Management of Mechanics' Institutions in 1853, urged Unions, i.e. area groups of Institutions, to economise by combining to arrange lectures. "It saves [the lecturer] much time and trouble," he wrote, "and by combining his engagements in topographical order . . . travelling expenses . . . are saved."<sup>4</sup> There was a Union in Yorkshire, but that was rather exceptional. As her career developed, Balfour was able to simplify some of her arrangements by making regular annual tours, of the West Country, for example, returning to well-known digs, and following a familiar route.

Adult Education could not have expanded as it did in the nineteenth century without the development of the railways. By far the greater part of Balfour's travel, especially in the later part of her career, was by train. But the network was by no means universal. All her travel in Cornwall was by mail coach – much slower, and relatively more expensive.

For example, in 1851, the journey from London to Plymouth by train cost her £4.1s return, and took eight hours. Travelling on by coach to Falmouth or Truro took a similar time, and cost £1 3s for a single journey. To get from Bodmin to Wadebridge there was no coach, and she had to hire a gig, which cost eight shillings for a mere seven miles.

(MAP II)

The fees she received from Institutes varied a good deal, throughout her career. The lowest documented were £1, and £1.11.6, in 1845 for lectures in London, where her travelling expenses were low. The last diary of 1869 still shows a range from £2.10 - £5.5. It is hard to explain why Worcester could pay nearly twice as much as Cheltenham - some Institutes were better managed than others! James Hole argued that many Institutes paid too little to obtain the best lecturers, but the Institutes themselves lacked adequate financial support. But Balfour was not undervalued, she commanded fees as good as those of some celebrated men. Her name was bracketed with those of George Dawson and Emerson, *the* Emerson, as lecturers too expensive to be invited by the Treasurer of Halifax Institute.

He may have underestimated her power to draw an audience, as these figures from Leicester<sup>5</sup> show that the Institution was not the loser.

	<u>Fee</u>	<u>Takings</u>
Mrs. Balfour (two lectures)	£10 10s	£13 19 6
Mr. N W Reeve	free	5 6
Mr. Buck (two lectures)	£ 10 10s	£10 5 6
Mr. Goodacre	free	£ 2 19 6
R W Emerson	£ 14.14	£15 1 6

Emerson charged more, and attracted a slightly larger fee-paying audience, but the takings from Balfour's lectures were only slightly less, and she actually made the biggest profit for the Institution.

The charges made by institutions to audiences varied also. Many, such as Leeds, admitted members free, or at concessionary prices. Seats for non-members for Clara's first lectures there in 1842 were advertised at 1/-, 6d and 3d. She was invited to stay on and give two more lectures, for which the Institute dropped its prices to 6d, 2d, and 1d.

*(I might make a comparison with this Institution, the BRLSI where we deliberately keep our charges low - £2 for members, £4 for non-members, as it is part of our purpose as a charity to be as inclusive as possible.)*

At Manchester Athenaeum, a grander organisation, non-members were charged 1/-. Ladies were only admitted here as guests of members, to hear a woman speaker on the subject of women writers.

Balfour's earnings were not pin money, but a substantial part of the family income. In 1854, at the height of her career, she was able to make £40 or £50 after expenses in six weeks' work. This may well have made her the principle breadwinner – though James, by now, had a steady post as a clerk or personal secretary at the House of Commons. Although her earnings legally belonged to her husband, in practice it is clear that she was very much in control of the family finance. When her son, John, aged about 18, went to Leeds as a Drapers' Assistant, he applied to Clara, not James, when the first payment of his salary was delayed. "You are welcome to all I can spare," she replied.

A week later she wrote,

I think of allowing you £4 a year until your salary is raised . . . I often think I ought to do better with my money, but when I think that we now have a good house, well-furnished, that my children are all well-provided for, and that seven years ago I was worth nothing, I think I have not done badly.”

She takes all the responsibility herself.

So, she affords an excellent example of Self Help. By hard work and with considerable courage she succeeded in raising her family from a state where young John had had to leave school at ten to take a job as errand boy, to a modest middle class prosperity. To be fair, James Balfour helped too, once he settled down, but could not have made so much difference without her contribution.

She must have been a role-model to women who heard her speak, showing that they could do things usually considered out of a woman’s “sphere”, without becoming un-feminine.

What else did her lectures achieve? There is clear evidence that they were entertaining and popular – not only the newspaper accounts, but the fact that she was frequently invited back to lecture again proves that.

What was her achievement in the field of education?

It was already understood by the mid-nineteenth century that a single lecture is only moderately effective as a means of education. Real learning is a slower, two-way process between teacher and student. It has to be said that Balfour’s lectures would not come very high on the scale of any academic or scholarly assessment today. We have seen that her formal education was almost non-existent, and although her struggle to read and educate herself is admirable, it could only take her so far. But then, the audiences she taught started from a very low educational level.

A good lecture, however, can be an introduction to a new subject – it can arouse interest. Most of the larger Mechanics’ Institutions had libraries, so an interest, once aroused, could be followed up. Balfour was always exploring new subjects, and must have introduced her listeners, on however elementary a level, to writers from Chaucer and Bunyan, to Burns, Keats and Charlotte Bronte. She included readings, particularly of poetry, in her literary lectures, and this, done well, can be an exciting, even transforming experience for a listener. An enthusiastic teacher of literature can stimulate interest, and educate the emotions and the imagination, before more intellectual, critical faculties need to come into play.

Done well, this was itself no small contribution to adult education of a section of society which had never been offered it before.

(Picture of Clara Lucas Balfour)

References:

- 1 Burns, C. Memorial Leaves Privately printed 1898. Burns was Clara Balfour's daughter.
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Leeds Intelligencer 1842  
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Liverpool Mercury 1646.
- 4 Hole, J. An Essay on the History and Management of Literary, Scientific and Mechanics' Institutes. Longman 1843, reprinted Cass 1970 p 143
- 5 Lott, F.B. The story of the Leicester MI, 1833 – 71 Leicester 1935