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‘Within their sphere? Women correspondents to Aberdeen daily newspapers 1900-1914’

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On 13 May 1911 Marian S Farquharson, of Haughton wrote a letter to the *Aberdeen Free Press* criticising Aberdeenshire council’s proposed restrictions on the speed of motorcars. As a car owner herself, Mrs Farquharson felt that ‘a motor going at 20 miles an hour is as easily controlled as a horse going at a small trot of say 10 miles an hour’.¹ While this letter in itself may not seem at all unusual, the letter-writer was. This was the 129th letter Mrs Farquharson had written to the letters column of the *Free Press* since the beginning of 1900, in addition to 12 other letters to the other daily newspaper in Aberdeen, *The Aberdeen Daily Journal*. When she died on 20 April 1912, a sigh of relief can be imagined in the newspaper offices across Aberdeen.

Mrs Farquharson was not typical of the woman correspondent to the letters columns of the Aberdeen newspapers during the Edwardian period, but she is a wonderful example of how historians can use such letters to gain an insight into the thoughts and day-to-day life of women who might otherwise be lost to history. For most women correspondents to these newspapers, the one or two letters published in the letters columns might be the only published material they bequeathed to history, perhaps the only written material at all. Although this is not entirely true in Mrs Farquharson’s case - she was the author of some books on botany² - we have 141 letters, offering all sorts of personal information about her life and her opinions.

We know that Marian Farquharson was born in England in 1846 into a clergyman’s family and was a proud descendent of the Protestant martyr Ridley. In 1883, at the late age of 37, she married Robert Farquharson of Haughton House, Alford in Aberdeenshire, who was 60 at the

¹ Marian Farquharson, ‘Letters to the Editor’, *Aberdeen Free Press*, 13 May 1911

² For example, *A Pocket Guide to British Ferns*, publishing in 1881

time and already had two daughters by his first marriage. After seven years of what seems a happy marriage - Marian writes of 'happy days ... learning from my husband many most interesting results of agricultural research'³ - Robert died, but Marian remained in Scotland for the rest of her life, and had obviously fallen in love with the country. From her letters we learn of her love of Scottish song, which she believed to be 'vastly superior to those of other parts of the kingdom', and her opinion that 'Scottish opera would vie powerfully with that of Italian fame'⁴. In 1909, her nationality apparently no bar, she happily accepted the post of Honorary Vice-President of the Aberdeen Centre of the Scottish National Song Society. She was also the Honorary President of the Young Scots Society. Her letters celebrated the Aberdeenshire people, especially their farmers - she claimed that 'I have for years regarded Aberdeenshire as possessing the most intelligent and honourable agriculturists in the world'⁵ and entered into an argument with other correspondents about when the turnip was first introduced into Scotland. Some of her opinions might be considered eccentric - she felt that the Scottish economy could be revitalised if more householders would use tartan for curtains and carpets, and proudly reported that her stair-carpet was made from tartan - but she would always support her arguments by reference to the opinion of others, as reported in books or newspaper articles.

Marian's use of the words of others to evidence her own opinions was a very strong element in her arguments. She evidently read widely. In her letters she makes reference at different times to articles from the usual national dailies, such as the *Daily News* and the *Times*, but also mentions *The Lancet*, *The Economic Review*, *The Sugar Users' Journal*, and *The Veterinary Journal*. However, it should not be assumed that Marian was a keen subscriber to all these journals. In one letter she explains that she used a 'newspaper cuttings agency' as 'through great pressure of

³ Marian Farquharson, 'Letters to the Editor', *Aberdeen Free Press*, 18 May 1904

⁴ Marian Farquharson, 'Letters to the Editor', *Aberdeen Free Press*, 9 September 1909

⁵ Marian Farquharson, 'Letters to the Editor', *Aberdeen Free Press*, 18 May 1904

business... I have been unable to read most of the dailies'⁶. She also tells her audience that she relies greatly on her press cuttings books, which she has been in the habit of maintaining for many years. Indeed, she writes, 'It is a matter of hourly wonderment to me how the majority of Scottish men and women... appear to have made no newspaper cuttings, books which I find so invaluable as accurate records of the words our statesmen have uttered at various epochs of their history'.⁷ Such statements, and her constant use of newspaper clippings to reinforce her arguments, show that Marian evidently subscribed to the dictum, 'if it's in the paper, it must be true'.

This belief in the accuracy and truthfulness of newspapers may also be a reason why Marian Farquharson wrote letters to the editor so frequently. She was a woman of strong opinions who desired to convince her readership of the righteousness of her particular view. Marian wrote letters on subjects ranging from the medical inspection of schoolchildren to motorcar safety and how to prevent butter from going bad. Criticism from other letter-writers (usually male) only made her write longer and more enthusiastic letters. She was a keen advocate of equality for women - not just in the matter of the vote, but in all areas of life. As President of the Scottish Association for the Promotion of Women's Public Work and the Women's International Progressive Union she worked for the admission of women into local government, public bodies and, her particular area of interest, scientific societies. Marian was herself a respected botanist and attempted to be among the first women fellows of the Linnean Society. In their *Bicentenary History of the Linnean Society of London*, Gage and Stearn describe her four-year struggle, 'rebuffed but undaunted', to raise the question of the admission of women to the Society.⁸ Eventually, in November 1904, the names of 16 women were presented to the Society's meeting

⁶ Marian Farquharson, 'Letters to the Editor', *Aberdeen Daily Journal*, 19 May 1904

⁷ Marian Farquharson, 'Letters to the Editor', *Aberdeen Free Press*, 17 May 1904

⁸ Andrew Thomas Gage and William Thomas Stearn, *A Bicentenary History of The Linnean Society of London*, 1988, pp 88-91

for election. Fifteen women were elected - Marian Farquharson was blackballed. It was not until March 1908 that she was finally elected to the society, and ill-health meant that she was prevented from being formally admitted before her death in Nice in 1912.

With her letters on women's role in the world, butter-making and medical inspections, Marian may have been more prolific than other women correspondents to the Aberdeen newspapers, but she was keeping within what seem to have been the accepted parameters for women's letters to the editor. As inhabitants of a separate 'women's sphere' it was accepted that women had important things to say - or write - about matters such as children, health and the household. With the admission of women as voters in matters of local government, such as school and parish boards, this sphere widened during the first decade of the 20th century.

The research discussed in this paper involved the analysis of all letters identified as being written by women to the *Aberdeen Daily Journal* and *Free Press* between the years 1900 and 1914. Not all women were as brazen (some might say foolhardy) as Marian Farquharson, who signed her letters with her full name and address and scorned the use of *nom de plumes* by any of her literary protagonists - 'I much regret that the anonymous writer does not reveal his identity, as surely if a case is worth pleading at all there is no reason to be ashamed of or cowardly in expressing authentically his or her opinions'.⁹

For the purposes of this research, it was decided to identify as female any correspondent giving her full name; using a female *nom de plume* or identifying herself as a woman in her letter. Many *nom de plumes* used in the correspondence columns of the newspapers were gender-specific, for example, "A Working Man"; "Dorcas" or - most popular - "A Mother". Others, such as "Suffra Jet" or "Member of the WSPU", also imply a female correspondent (men were not allowed to be

members of the Women's Social and Political Union). It has to be accepted that some female correspondents were not counted using these criteria. It is impossible to discern the gender of "Hopeful" or "Annoyed of Crathes"! However, since someone using such non-gender-specific names obviously did not want to be identified as a woman - and was presumed by subsequent correspondents to be male - this should not have affected the overall findings. In the cases of correspondents who signed themselves with initials or as A.B. Smith, etc, they were also counted as non-female - again using subsequent correspondents' assumptions that they were male ("Mr Smith's letter of...."). In total, 416 letters from women correspondents were identified in the letters column of the *Daily Journal*, seen as the more conservative newspaper, and 650 in the more liberal *Free Press*. However, when looking at these figures, we have to take account of the 'Marian Factor' - she actually wrote 129 of the *Free Press* letters; nearly a sixth of all letters from women correspondents to that newspaper.

This article looks at these two groups of female newspaper correspondents - to the *Free Press* and the *Journal* - identifies similarities and differences between the two, and asks how far outside the 'women's sphere' such correspondents were willing to go.

Seventy-six of the letters are printed simultaneously in both newspapers, with this amount being spread evenly throughout the period. The majority of these duplicate letters are either asking for aid or giving information. The secretaries of various charities, such as the Red Cross, the Orphan Homes for Scotland or the Aberdeen Home for Motherless Children, write to request subscriptions or other types of aid, or to report on their year's fund-raising. The leaders of woman suffrage societies write to offer information on their societies' aims or to correct generally held misconceptions. What is important to note about these letters is that, for the most part, they are not written in response to anything else printed in the newspaper. Earlier research looking at

⁹ Marian S Farquharson, 'Letters to the Editor', *Aberdeen Free Press*, 3 June 1904

people who write letters to newspapers, for example by Foster and Friedrich¹⁰, has suggested that most letters are triggered by other letters or editorial on the subject. In addition, some commentators suggest that letters to the editor can be seen as a kind of 'safety valve', allowing angry or upset readers to 'get something off their chest' in a harmless but therapeutic way. Linked to this second motivation was the fact that the majority of letters studied in contemporary newspapers were written in a negative tone, rather than a positive or neutral one. This is also true of the vast majority of the letters studied here. Most women wrote to the Aberdeen newspapers to agree or disagree with something they had read in the newspaper - and the majority were written in tones of complaint.

However, most of the letters printed simultaneously in both newspapers do not conform to this pattern. Instead, they have been generated to raise awareness of a particular issue. For example, Katharine M Lumsden always sent copies of her letters to both newspapers. As the late honorary superintendent of the Aberdeen Royal Hospital for Sick Children, Miss Lumsden's letters were attempts to raise awareness about issues such as children's burning accidents, collections for the hospital, and the need for a crematorium in Aberdeen.

Such duplicate letters are useful for checking the amount of editing letters would receive before being published. Most, such as Miss Lumsden's letters, seem to be published with very few changes. However, there is evidence of a certain amount of editing being applied at the *Daily Journal*. For example, on 15 June 1906, the letter of 'Only a Woman' was printed in the *Journal*

¹⁰ For examples of research into contemporary letter writers to newspapers, see Lander, Byron, G, 'Functions of Letters to the Editor: A Re-examination'. *Journalism Quarterly*. Volume XLIX, 1972, p 142; Foster, H Schuyler and Friedrich, Carl J, 'Letters to the editor as a means of measuring the effectiveness of propaganda'. *American Political Science Review*. Volume XXXI, February 1937, pp 71-79; Buell, E H, 'Eccentrics or gladiators? People who write about politics in letters to the editor'. *Social Science Quarterly*. Volume LVI, 1975, pp 440-449; Volgy, T J et al, 'Some of my best friends are letter writers: Eccentrics and gladiators revisited'. *Social Science Quarterly*. Volume LVIII, 1977, pp 321-327; Grey D L and Brown T B, 'Letters to the editor: Hazy reflections of public opinion'. *Journalism Quarterly*. Volume XLVII, 1970, pp 450-456, 471.

complaining about work being undertaken in the churchyard in Strichen. A similar letter from the same correspondent appears in the *Free Press* of the same day. The *Journal* letter begins: 'Since the question of providing additional burying ground was raised, now practically five months ago...'¹¹ The *Free Press* letter starts more aggressively, 'Since this disreputable case began...'¹² The rest of the two letters are exactly the same, outlining the problems occurring in the churchyard and asking what Strichen folk should do about it all. However, they diverge near the end. The *Journal* letter suggests 'I hold that the people of Strichen would be acting lawfully in removing these turfs that have been laid down'¹³ while the *Press* version says 'I hold that the people of Strichen would be acting more lawfully in removing these turfs that have been laid down by the factor's orders than he did in laying them there. He has by a long way exceeded his powers, and he is tampering far too much and has tampered far too long with the feelings of a peaceable community.'¹⁴ The editor of the *Journal* did not appear to want to print such criticisms of a particular individual.

The same editing by the *Journal* of strongly worded criticism of authority can be found in August 1911, during a strike by the railway workers. 'Stationmaster's Wife' wrote to both newspapers to explain the railway workers' grievances. In almost identical letters she asked who was more worthy of a salary increase. In the *Journal* she asked 'Is it the high official or is it the patient, hardworking stationmaster and clerk?'¹⁵ In the *Press* this became: 'Is it the high official who struts about showing his authority, or is it the patient, hardworking stationmaster and clerk, who are not ashamed to own the dignity of labour, and who can despise the lordling who would, if he could, sweat the very life blood from his supposed inferiors?'¹⁶ Since the rest of these letters are

¹¹ 'Only a Woman', 'Letters to the Editor', *Aberdeen Daily Journal*, 15 June 1906

¹² 'Only a Woman', 'Letters to the Editor', *Aberdeen Free Press*, 15 June 1906

¹³ *Aberdeen Daily Journal*, 15 June 1906

¹⁴ *Aberdeen Free Press*, 15 June 1906

¹⁵ 'Stationmaster's Wife', 'Letters to the Editor', *Aberdeen Daily Journal*, 18 August 1911

¹⁶ 'Stationmaster's Wife', 'Letters to the Editor', *Aberdeen Free Press*, 18 August 1911

identical, it may be presumed that the editor of the *Journal* removed the offending criticisms before printing the letters. Certainly, the *Press* at that time had the reputation for being the more liberal newspaper. From 1910 the *Journal* was edited by William Maxwell, a keen Unionist who aimed at converting the fundamentally liberal North-East to Unionism – in later life he became the President of the South Aberdeen Unionist Association.

Of course, it might be suggested that such differences are the result of the correspondents' self-censorship. Could correspondents expect to be given a freer rein in their discussion of individuals in authority by the liberal *Free Press*? However, a reading of the entire text of such letters leads to the conclusion that the differences should be ascribed to the editorial pen. It should also be noted that the editor of the *Journal* was more inclined to cut anonymous correspondents' letters, and usually allowed duplicates from named women (and, in particular, named Ladies) to be published untouched.

One of the reasons these two Aberdeen newspapers were chosen for this research is that little evidence of what is called 'editorial gate-keeping' can be found during the period in question. Many contemporary studies of newspaper correspondence have found it difficult to assess the representativeness of letters published in newspapers because of an element of editorial choice or censorship, meaning that some letters are not published. Such censorship is implemented because of a lack of space or in an attempt to remain strictly politically neutral.¹⁷ Little evidence of such editorial gatekeeping has been found in the *Aberdeen Daily Journal* or *Free Press* during the period 1900-14. The policy appears to have been one of full publication of all letters, as long as accompanied by a name and address (although, as we have seen, correspondents could request to remain anonymous in print). When the editor did decide not to print a letter, a note appeared at

¹⁷ See the referenced articles in footnote 10 for more information on the phenomenon of 'editorial gatekeeping'

the bottom of the Letters column, giving a reason. This means that we can assume that any differences in *subject* matter between the two newspapers' letters columns have their root in the correspondents, and their perception of the appropriateness of the subject matter for that newspaper, rather than being a result of editorial choice.

So it was the women correspondents who decided, for example, that it was more appropriate to send letters about women's suffrage and equality to the *Free Press* rather than the *Journal*. 221 letters were sent to the *Press* on this subject during the period 1900 to 1914, compared to only 62 to the *Journal*. Other differences also suggest that more 'New Women' could be found reading the *Press* than the more conservative *Journal* - seven letters complaining about the lack of swimming facilities for women, compared to two in the *Journal*; ten letters on the subject of motorcars, none in the *Journal*; 45 letters dealing with other matters of national politics, compared with 6 in the *Journal*. In matters of local government, *Press* readers also seem more outspoken - 35 letters about parish and school board matters compared to 14 in the *Journal*.

So if we can characterise the average female correspondent to the *Press* as a 'New Woman', keen to debate political issues and the 'woman question', what sort of woman wrote to the *Journal*? Certainly there is more concern about what could be seen as 'traditional women's issues'. 55 letters deal with charities and fund-raising, compared to 44 in the *Press*; there are 14 letters concerned with animal welfare and against vivisection, where the *Press* has only four; 40 letters deal with household matters: the price of milk, the incompetence of servants, bad butter, compared to only nine letters on the same subjects in the *Press*. There are 25 letters in both newspapers on the subject of bad butter alone during the period - a problem that seems to have bothered Aberdeen housewives almost every summer. The *Journal* also seems to have attracted more correspondence from 'below stairs', 12 letters from working-class women, who identified themselves as maids, servants, shop lassies, etc. Only two of these letters appear before 1911,

showing that working-class women were slower than their middle-class sisters to grasp the opportunity of publication in a local newspaper - even anonymously. The most striking difference between the correspondence to the two newspapers appears in this area. Sixteen women, both servants and their mistresses, wrote to the *Journal* regarding the Insurance Act, with its new policy of requiring workers and their employers to insure against ill-health. Most of the letters are complaints about government interference in domestic matters, criticising the government for entering this 'woman's sphere', which is perhaps why only four letters were written to the *Free Press* on the subject.¹⁸

Although there are instances of militant suffragettes writing to the *Journal* and cat-loving homebodies writing to the *Free Press*, there does seem to be enough evidence to posit a more conservative *Daily Journal* attracting letters from women concerned about charitable works, animal welfare and household problems. These women were more likely to become involved in discussing politics when it impinged directly on their domestic sphere, for example the demands of the Insurance Act on employers and servants alike. In comparison, the *Free Press* attracted more letters from what can be described as 'New Women', concerned with the demand for the vote and other political issues, and less inclined to become involved in debate on 'domestic' matters.

So how far were women correspondents to Aberdeen newspapers keeping within the traditional 'woman's sphere' and how far were they moving outside it to discuss non-traditional subjects? The majority of their letters were on subjects women were supposed to be concerned with - even the letters about local government concentrate on health or education. Yes, there was much discussion of the demand for women's suffrage - but by the 1900s had that also become a regular

¹⁸ For more on this issue, see Sarah Pedersen, 'The Appearance of Women's Politics in the Correspondence Pages of Aberdeen Newspapers 1900-14', *Women's History Review*, Winter 2001 (Forthcoming)

part of women's discourse - at least for the 'newer' woman - so that a letter on such a topic was no longer a question of stepping outside established bounds?

If we are looking for correspondence from a woman that deals directly with issues which might be considered part of a 'man's sphere', then we end up where we started - with Marian Farquharson. Marian is unique in her readiness to tread where other women feared - or did not want - to go. Marian did not see her femininity as disqualifying her from any subject. One of the most frequent subjects in the letters columns of both newspapers at this time was religion. This subject was usually discussed among a small select group of men, mostly ministers, and the correspondence could get exceedingly abusive. Of all the women who wrote to the newspapers on a wide variety of topics, only Marian - backed by 'my ancestor Bishop Ridley' - dared take on a group of Presbyterian and Church of Scotland ministers on subjects such as baptismal regeneration and the historical Christ, ignoring their outrage that a woman (and an Englishwoman at that) dared dispute such subjects with them.

Marian's other great topic of correspondence, accounting for 70 of her letters to the *Free Press*, was the defence of free trade against 'Chamberlainism', the re-introduction of some kind of tariff control on imported goods. She wrote at great length on this subject, making use of her press cuttings for facts, figures and opinions from what she called 'men of light and learning', ie anyone who agreed with her. Although her arguments can not always be said to be logical, no one can deny her commitment to the cause, which led to her forsaking the Primrose League of the Conservative Party and becoming a fervent Liberal supporter. Again, her discussion of such matters was not always seen as appropriate for a woman. One of her critics, Mr McKenzie, was inclined to dismiss all of her lengthy letters, full of fact and figures, with the words '[Women's]

knowledge of public affairs is limited to their own minds... They are not capable of maintaining their views with ingenious and plausible argument'.¹⁹

It can therefore be seen that the women who wrote letters for publication in the Aberdeen daily newspapers of the Edwardian period made conscious decisions about which forum to use. The more liberal 'New Woman', interested in the suffrage and local politics, was more likely to write to the *Free Press*, while women's letters to the *Journal* concentrated on more traditional 'womanly' subjects. In addition, the *Press* was more likely to allow criticism of local authorities - 'whistle blowing; even - while the *Journal* was more liable to edit such comments out.

Women used the letters columns of both newspapers to make their views about a wide variety of topics known to readers outside their social and domestic circle. However, for the most part, their topics of correspondence remained within the 'woman's sphere' of acceptable subjects women were allowed to have opinions on - even women's suffrage being an accepted 'new women's' subject. They rarely encroached into the 'man's sphere' of subjects such as Imperial politics and Biblical criticism. Unless they were Marian Farquharson.

To conclude, it must be pointed out that it was not only men who were uncomfortable with Marian's frequent letter-writing. On 11 December 1903 a letter entitled 'Mrs Farquharson of Haughton' appeared in both newspapers. This stated:

I have to submit to a good deal of inconvenience and annoyance through the sayings and doings of a lady who, in letters to the press and which are likely to see light through the press, subscribes herself 'Marian S Farquharson of Haughton' without having the smallest right to the designation. As my name so closely resembles Mrs

¹⁹ Marian Farquharson, 'Letters to the Editor', *Aberdeen Free Press*, 31 May 1904

Farquharson's (not of Haughton), I find myself sometimes credited with peculiar views about things in general - views which I in no way share....

I beg of you to allow me to ... ask the public not to hold me responsible for letters signed 'Marian S Farquharson of Haughton', or for the acts of Mrs Farquharson, improperly described as 'of Haughton'; and to request the Aberdeen shopkeepers and others not to address to Haughton any parcels or letters intended for Mrs Farquharson, as their doing so only leads to trouble and expense to themselves and to me.'²⁰

The letter is signed Maria O Farquharson of Haughton - Marian's step-daughter, showing that even family, or perhaps especially family, had difficulty with women stepping outside their 'proper' sphere.

²⁰ Maria O Farquharson, 'Letters to the Editor', *Aberdeen Free Press*, 11 December 1903