

1998

## Baraba Leigh-Smith Bodichon: Feminist, Artist and Rebel

Pam Hirsch

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger>

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

---

Hirsch, Pam, "Baraba Leigh-Smith Bodichon: Feminist, Artist and Rebel" (1998). *The George Eliot Review*. 349.  
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/349>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The George Eliot Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

**Pam Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh-Smith Bodichon: Feminist, Artist and Rebel*  
(Chatto and Windus, 1998). pp. x + 390. ISBN 0 7011 6797 1. £20**

It is impossible not to be impressed by Barbara Leigh-Smith Bodichon. Her life is interesting for its diversity, rather than for any single accomplishment, and therefore she has posed a challenge for biographers. Most accounts of Bodichon, such as Sheila Hernstein's *A Mid-Victorian Feminist: Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon* (1985) and Candida Ann Lacey's collection, *Barbara Bodichon and the Langham Place Group* (1987), have focused on her activities as a social reformer. The first complete biography since Hester Burton's *Barbara Bodichon, 1827-1891* (1949), is Pam Hirsch's *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon: Feminist, Artist and Rebel*. Hirsch recognizes the relative neglect of Bodichon as a consequence of her multi-faceted career: 'She did *many* things, and historians seem to find it easier to understand and write about a man who pursued one 'great' goal. Women's lives and women's histories often look different, more diffuse and are (perhaps) harder to evaluate' (ix). While this generalization does not describe the historical treatment of many of Bodichon's friends and collaborators, such as George Eliot, Elizabeth Blackwell or Emily Davies — known for contributions in specific areas of Victorian culture and society — it does hold true for Bodichon. Her career combined political agitation for the Married Women's Property Act, the founding of the *English Woman's Journal* (1858), and the campaign to establish a college for women at Cambridge, culminating in the opening of Girton College in 1873. But Bodichon thought of herself as an artist — a painter. One of Hirsch's most important contributions is to call attention to the continuity of Bodichon's identity as an artist, even as she pursued her various activities on behalf of women.

Hirsch provides a variety of historical contexts to help explain Bodichon's achievements. We receive some background on topics ranging from Unitarianism to the obstacles facing Victorian women painters. In this sense, the book is useful to students of nineteenth-century social movements and culture, but as a biography, it is not methodologically self-conscious. Hirsch has no particular take on Bodichon's life, perhaps because there has not been enough biographical controversy to require a redirection of the subject. So she promises to remain 'faithful to those things the police call "the facts"' (ix). Despite this first of several gestures toward an awareness of post-structuralist historical critiques, her biography does not question the existence of facts. She describes her method in modest, if metaphorical terms, comparing her task to that of the 'mosaicist, who creates a picture out of tiny fragments of coloured enamel' (ix). The metaphor does not recur after the preface, and what we have is a combination of the 'facts' in a linear narrative and, with the exception of occasional confusing skips forward, a standard birth-to-death account of Bodichon's rich and varied life.

George Eliot figures prominently in Bodichon's story, and without providing any new revelations, Hirsch helps clarify the reasons for their enduring friendship. Bodichon was 'illegitimate'. Her father, Benjamin Smith, never married her mother, Anne Longden, though he acknowledged and supported the five children from the relationship. Hirsch speculates that Bodichon's marginal social status led her to sympathize with Eliot, ostracized from polite society because of her irregular 'marriage' to George Henry Lewes. Bodichon is often compared to Romola, as she seems to have been the physical model for Eliot's heroine, but the Bodichon

who emerges from the biography is inwardly more like Daniel Deronda, a 'rarer sort' whose 'inexorable sorrow takes the form of fellowship and makes the imagination tender' (149). Although Bodichon knew that her parents were not married, she received a shock when she discovered in 1852 that her father had a second family with a woman named Jane Buss (whom he did not marry). Jane Buss and her three children were kept by Benjamin Smith (Lydia Glasher-like) in a house in Fulham and were provided for in his will. Some speculation about Bodichon's influence on Eliot's fiction might have been interesting. Unfortunately, when she ventures to compare Bodichon's *A Brief Summary, in Plain Language, of the Most Important Laws Concerning Women* (1854) to Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-2), Hirsch misquotes *Middlemarch* in a way that distorts its meaning and raises questions about her accuracy (89).

Perhaps the value of Hirsch's biography is that it points to neglected aspects of Bodichon's experience that might now be taken up by scholars and historians in light of recent intellectual developments and trends. Foremost among these is Bodichon's role as a facilitator of emigration to the British colonies and also as a resident in French colonial Algiers. As Hirsch notes, the Smith fortune was made in trade. Bodichon's grandfather, William Smith, was instrumental in anti-slavery agitation which led to the abolition of slavery in the colonies in 1833. Hirsch writes: 'The Smith family, like every mercantile family, was implicated in the slave trade, because the import of sugar was an important part of their business; yet William, against his own business interests, campaigned fiercely against it' (2).

Hirsch gives more attention than have other biographers to Bodichon's life in Algeria, where she spent half of every year after marriage to Dr Eugene Bodichon in 1857. Dr Bodichon was also involved in abolishing slavery in Algeria and Hirsch gives a summary of his racial theories and a teasing account of Bodichon's landscapes of the country around her Algerian home. Her only reference to the expansive field of post-colonial studies is dismissive: 'Perhaps her landscapes, celebrating the beauty of Algeria, could be seen as complicit in the production of an Orientalist Other for the consumption of Western purchasers, but this was certainly not her intention' (139). In raising the defense of 'intention', Hirsch misses the point of scholarship on nineteenth-century Orientalist discourses.

Bodichon's involvement in the process of European colonization went beyond her Orientalist representations of Algeria. She was an advocate of women's emigration to the British colonies. She helped to found the Female Middle-Class Emigration Society in 1862 with Maria Rye. She also wrote articles in the *English Woman's Journal* about the benefits of women's emigration. Little has been written about Bodichon's role in the organized women's emigration movement, and while Hirsch provides the basic information, her analysis of Bodichon's thoughts on the subject lacks insight: 'Barbara was committed to emigration schemes largely because her father had believed in it as a solution' (195). It would be helpful to know exactly what Benjamin Smith thought emigration was a solution for and why Bodichon should have unquestioningly adopted his views on this particular subject.

Perhaps even more interesting from the point of view of documenting the story of women's lives was the unofficial, non-institutional impact Bodichon had on supporting emigration. Hirsch fails to note that it was Bodichon who suggested the emigration of Lewes's son Thornton to Natal. Eliot wrote in her diary for 15 September 1863: 'Mrs Bodichon having re-

commended Natal and offered to further Thornie by writing on his behalf to her friends there, we think now of sending him thither' (*JGE*, 119). The friends in question were the Buchanans, the family of her childhood teacher James Buchanan. Bodichon maintained a regular correspondence with various members of the family in South Africa, including James's son, Ebenezer Buchanan, whose daughter Barbara Isabella Buchanan provides one of Hirsch's main sources: the *Buchanan Family Records* (1923). Confusingly, Hirsch omits the 'Barbara' from her name, identifying her as only as 'Isabella Buchanan' in a list of abbreviated titles (325), and also fails to include Buchanan's book in her bibliography. Such inconsistencies make this biography frustrating for anyone attempting to pursue the research contained in it.

In the *Buchanan Family Records*, as well as in her memoir, *Pioneer Days in Natal* (1934), Barbara I. Buchanan mentions meeting both Thornton and Herbert Lewes and gives an indication of Bodichon's extensive influence on emigration to Natal, recalling: 'Several teachers who came out to Natal under the auspices of this society brought letters of introduction from Mme Bodichon,' as did many of the young male emigrants who stayed with her family (Buchanan, 12).

Issues of women's emigration are an important component of Bodichon's politics, and the relationship between Victorian feminism and the British empire has recently been explored in several works. Antoinette Burton's *Burdens of History*, for example, argues that 'middle-class liberal feminism was one of the manifestations of British cultural hegemony as well as one of the technologies of British imperial power' (19). Bodichon was an outspoken critic of American slavery during her honeymoon tour of the United States (1857-8), writing in her (now published) *American Diary*: 'Slavery is the greater injustice, but it is allied to the injustice to women so closely that I cannot see one without thinking of the other...' (qtd. in Hirsch, 151). She also wrote sympathetically about Algerian women, but she thought one of the best things a young British person could do was participate in the colonization of South Africa.

Such fascinating and difficult issues are raised by Bodichon's life, and we can only hope that future historians will use Hirsch's biography as a starting point for the revitalization of interest in Bodichon as a refreshingly original personality and also as a representative of her time.

**Nancy Henry**  
**The State University of New York at Binghamton**

Works Cited:

Buchanan, Barbara I. *Buchanan Family Records. James Buchanan and his Descendants* (Capetown, 1923).

Burton, Antoinette, *The Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1994).

George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Graham Handley (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984).

*The Journals of George Eliot*, ed. Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998).