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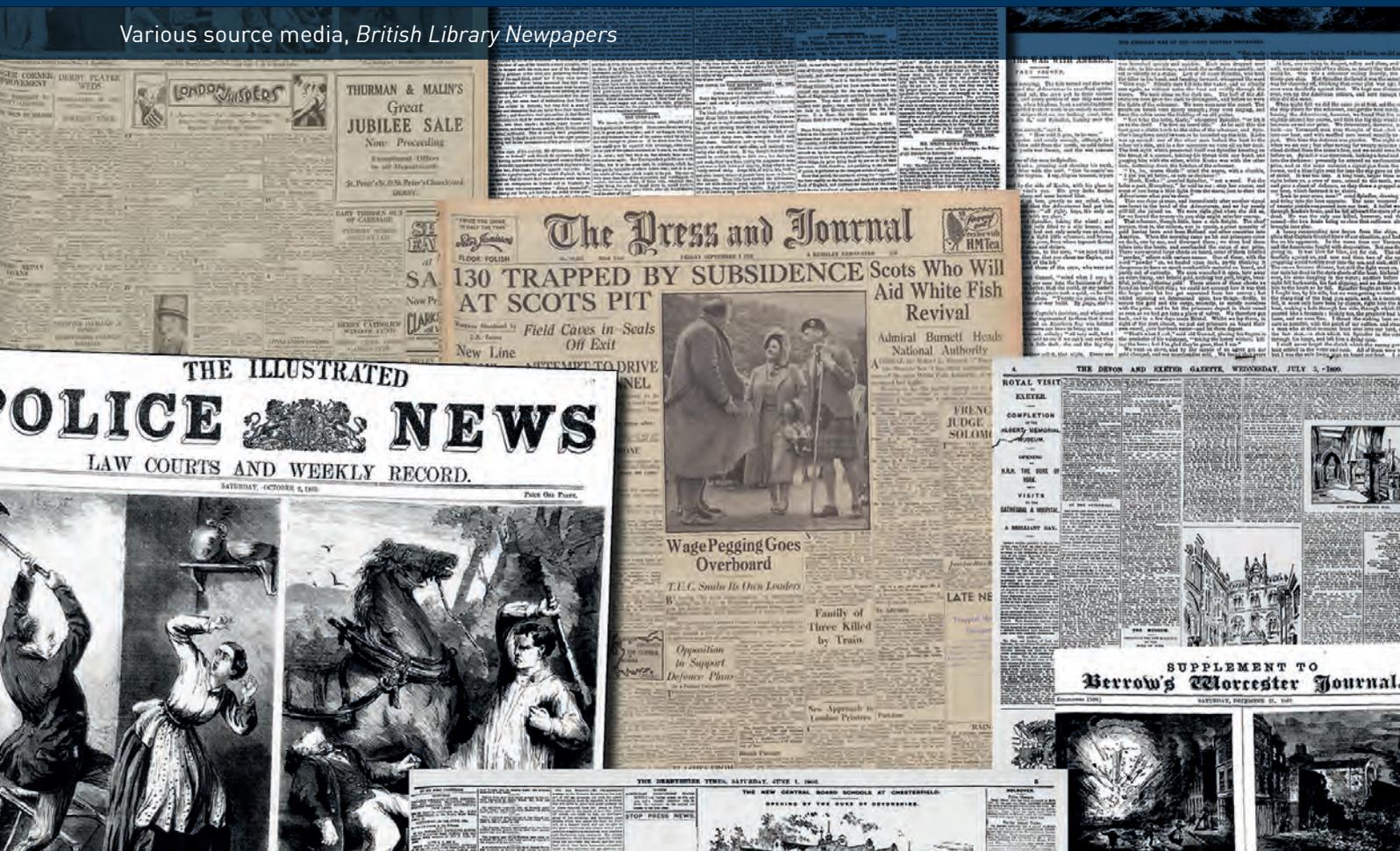
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Rights, Responsibilities and Emancipation

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To talk of the *natural* rights of all men, in a state of artificial society like ours, we take to be sheer nonsense.....no man should be admitted to the rights of a citizen who does not show, by the possession of at least the lower branches of knowledge, that he is something more than a mere animal machine.

Universal and equal human rights are taken for granted in twenty-first-century British society. As the opening extract (from the first edition of *The Era* of 30 September 1838) suggests, in the nineteenth century people understood rights and responsibilities in very different ways. How and why then were some rights granted to certain groups in society, but repeatedly denied to others? Here we will focus on four key emancipationist campaigns, which suggest the changing and complex ways in which newspapers played a role in shaping ideas of citizenship.

Abolition of slavery

The campaign for the abolition of slavery was the formative British campaign for human rights and the first campaign to use modern "grass-roots" political strategies. Abolitionism began as a popular movement in the 1780s to campaign for an end to the trans-Atlantic trade in African slaves, resulting in the Act of 1807 that banned the trafficking of individuals. However, from the 1820s abolitionists focused on the institution of race-based slavery itself, and in 1833 the Slavery Abolition Act prohibited the practice of slavery in all British colonies. This extended the prohibition on the ownership of slaves that had been instituted in Britain itself from the 1770s. Much of the British press, particularly Liberal and Radical newspapers, played a

key role in promoting the activities of associations such as the Anti-Slavery Society, and took great pride in their success. *The Examiner* of 10 January 1808 declared:

I cannot help repeating what I have observed elsewhere that "it will be more glory to England to have abolished the Slave Trade than if she had conquered the universe." If Napoleon establishes his renown on the enslavement of one continent, posterity will erect to us a nobler immortality for the freedom we have bestowed on another.

This sense of moral superiority was one to which campaigners consistently returned. Other nations were condemned for failing to imitate what was perceived to be an imperial and Christian moral mission. Middle-class women were particularly active in organising anti-slavery societies, using their consumer power to boycott West Indian sugar and cotton, and publicising the campaign through petitions, home visiting and public meetings. As we will see in subsequent campaigns for rights, the language and tactics deployed in abolitionism were repeatedly invoked later in the century, but in very different contexts. However, it is important to emphasise that the rights for which abolitionists campaigned were strictly limited. Campaigners argued that all humans, irrespective of skin colour, had the moral and divinely-ordained right to personal freedom and that it was against Christian teachings to make them another person's property and to enslave their souls. However, abolitionism did not aim to challenge the wider social hierarchy or generate political unrest in Britain. It was taken for granted that black people were innately inferior to white, so that they merited the protection and charity offered by the abolitionist movement. Therefore, in campaigning for the personal rights of fellow human beings elsewhere

in the Empire, anti-slavery campaigns also entrenched ideas of collective black powerlessness and wider social inequalities.

Religious Liberty

By way of contrast, the increasingly vehement campaign for the rights of religious minorities—most notably Nonconformist Protestants, Roman Catholics and Jews—directly challenged the British social and political hierarchy. Anglicanism had been established as the national religion of England, Wales and Ireland since the sixteenth-century Reformation, making the Church and state inseparable. Although the principle of religious toleration was also established, the denial of certain rights to anyone who did not conform to Anglican doctrines was central to the British legal and institutional system. English universities only admitted Anglicans, many legal roles could only be performed by the Established Church, Anglican oaths were sworn by those entering public office, and the Anglican Church and schools were funded by all rate-payers. Non-Protestants faced further discrimination, including being denied the right to be admitted as a Member of Parliament. Despite the fact that the majority of the Irish population was Catholic and that Wales was increasingly dominated by Nonconformity, the Church of Ireland and the Church of Wales similarly enjoyed Anglican privileges. The situation was different in Scotland where the Church of Scotland was Nonconformist Presbyterian, yet representatives from all four nations faced the same religious disabilities in their relations with the British state centred in London. The movement for religious emancipation was closely linked to campaigns for free trade and electoral reform. These issues dominated political news in the

first half of the century, and the Liberal press proudly claimed Parliamentary reforms as signs of their influence. In 1828 the Test and Corporation Acts were repealed (formally allowing Dissenters to hold public office) and the following year Catholic Emancipation was granted (giving Catholics freedom to worship, vote and hold most public offices). Nonconformists were given partial admission rights to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge in the 1850s, although it was not until 1871 that Religious Tests were abolished. In 1858 Parliamentary reform allowed the first Jewish MP, Lionel Rothschild, to finally take up his seat in the House of Commons nine years after his first election victory. Liberal opinion on these changes was represented by the leader-writer of *The Examiner* who, following the election of a Jewish MP for Reading, stated on 14 January 1860:

We rejoice at Sir F Goldsmid's election for Reading, not because it is the election of a Jew, but because it is the election of a well-informed, able man of Liberal opinions, whose opportunities of rendering service to society, great as they already are through his wealth, will be increased by his place in the legislature....It may be very wrong to be a Jew, but it is worse to be a Pharisee, and to be a Christian Pharisee is worst of all.

As this suggests, many arguments for religious emancipation were based upon the application of two principles: the individual's right to freedom of religion, and the state's duty to link rights to responsibilities. Prejudices against religious minorities and the centrality of Christianity to the state continued. However, it was believed that in order to create a just and moral nation, those who took on the responsibilities of the social and economic elite should

also be granted the rights of the leading men in civil and political life.

Male suffrage

Although men from outside the Anglican community were denied many civil rights until the late 1820s, this made them part of an excluded majority rather than an oppressed minority in Britain. For instance, in late eighteenth-century Scotland 0.2 per cent of the adult male population had the right to vote, with just thirty-three men enfranchised to elect the MP for Edinburgh. Crucially, the right to vote was granted only to those who had certain social responsibilities, and who were consequently perceived to be capable of using their vote in an educated and rational manner. It was certainly not considered to be a universal right, but instead was linked to the ownership of substantial freehold property and the status of being an independent householder. The large and increasingly wealthy populations of northern and midland cities were also particularly under-represented in parliament. It was in these industrial and urban areas that movements for electoral reform thrived. In the first few months of 1831 more than 1,000 petitions were presented to parliament, with those from Birmingham and Edinburgh containing over 21,000 signatures each. The campaign was very prominent in the provincial press. Indeed, *The Manchester Times* of 17 October 1828 described the system of electoral representation as a 'cancerous evil' that was responsible for all societal ills. The result of these campaigns was the Reform Act of 1832, which geographically redistributed parliamentary seats and extended the right to vote to a small number of middle-class male householders. Suffrage rights in local elections were also reformed in

1835. Although many elite contemporaries considered these reforms to be dangerously radical, they immediately spawned increasingly organised movements of skilled working-class people, demanding a further extension of rights, which crystallised to form Chartism (see separate essay on Chartism). As the *Glasgow Daily Herald* of 1 January 1867 remarked, Parliamentary Reform had become an 'ever-recurring question' in mid nineteenth-century Britain, in which 'The people are in downright earnest; and the ministers are at play.' Regular demonstrations of as many as 100,000 working-class people were held and petitions signed to demand electoral rights. The daily press played an important role both in portraying the feelings of "the people" and in representing working-class men as a responsible body of opinion. It was argued that men who supported their families from their own hard work and skill should be trusted with the right to vote. Legislative changes were also fundamentally tied up in party politics, but in 1867 the Conservatives and Liberals agreed on the Second Reform Act. This doubled the size of the electorate to include many more urban householders and lodgers, and in 1869 the right to a vote in local elections was reformed. The Third Reform Act of 1884 increased the size of the parliamentary electorate by 80 per cent, with the gains in representation concentrated in Wales, Scotland and Ireland. Although up to 40 per cent of the adult male population remained disenfranchised, the rights of "the people" were the new constituency to whom politicians sought to appeal.

Women's Rights

The rights and responsibilities of women were understood to be utterly different to those of men.

While male rights were based on their ability to earn sufficient income to maintain an independent household, property and family, women's rights were determined by their gender and marital status. Women were considered to be innately gentle, loving and caring, which gave them unique responsibilities that were centred on the home, family and religion. In 1800 all women were prohibited from studying at a British university, from voting in national elections and from standing for publicly-appointed positions. On marriage, women also lost the right to the ownership of property, to represent themselves in court and to the custody of their children. During the nineteenth century all of these prohibitions were challenged, with varying degrees of success and often with contrasting motivations. For most of the century campaigns for women's rights focused on social roles and the practicalities of earning an independent livelihood. Equal access to education and improved employment opportunities were seen to be central to female emancipation. These campaigns were dominated by middle-class women, but many of their concerns cut across class boundaries. The plight of working women was a particularly prominent concern, since not only did lower middle-class single women struggle to find suitable paid employment, but working-class women were perceived to be forced to neglect their maternal duties by working long hours in unhealthy conditions. One writer for the *Liverpool Mercury*, who used the initials 'LM', published a weekly column on 'Female Toil', which exposed the working conditions in the dress-making and tailoring trades. 'LM' typically concluded one column published on 1 January 1850 with the rousing statement: 'Readers! buckle on the armour of right, and remove the shackles of oppression from the limbs of our dear sisters of over-toil. 'One

occupation in which educated and middle-class women were unusually prominent was nineteenth-century journalism and publishing. Many similar columns on social problems had female authors, while others published serialised popular fiction. Newspapers could provide an opportunity for women to highlight their concerns about the social, moral and emotional freedoms of women without being seen to be challenging the wider social or political hierarchy. Campaigns for legal rights and constitutional changes were concentrated in the later nineteenth century. These often used a language of protection rather than of individual rights, focusing on the importance of legislation to defend married women from brutal and irresponsible husbands by granting rights to property, divorce and child custody. In this way, it was hoped that fears that women's legal rights would threaten the authority of husbands and fathers could be defused. It was only in the final years of the nineteenth century that women's right to vote became the subject of organised campaigns. Although the first National Society for Woman Suffrage was established in 1867 and single property-owning women gained the right to vote in local government elections in 1869, these campaigns were only supported by a small minority of Liberal middle-class men and women in this period, and they had limited coverage in many newspapers. The annual meeting of one such Women's Suffrage Society in Bristol was reported in *The Bristol Mercury* of 2 February 1895. The guest speaker, women's suffrage activist Millicent Garrett Fawcett, stated:

They did not ask for woman suffrage because they believed there was no difference between men and women. They believed there was a vital difference and they wished to see that difference expressed and represented. It was because their experience of life was different from that of men that they desired the protection of representation.

Although some feminists justified women's rights through innate human equality, it was more common to focus on the unique qualities and social responsibilities of women. However, their tactics were strongly informed by earlier movements. Reform associations, petitions, public speeches, marches and the lobbying of politicians were all used by both male and female campaigners, many of whom came from Liberal backgrounds and had been heavily involved in earlier reformist movements. Specialist periodicals were also founded, such as the pioneering *English Woman's Journal* and later the *Englishwoman's Review*. The language of enslavement was powerfully invoked by campaigns for rights throughout the century. As J.S. Mill argued in *The Subjection of Women* of 1869, 'there remain no legal slaves, except the mistress of every house'.

Conclusion

Understandings of rights and responsibilities had changed significantly in the nineteenth century, so that full citizenship rights were granted to a far larger proportion of the population by 1900. Many newspapers championed the language of rights and the importance of educating "the people" as citizens, and the publicity they provided for popular campaigns was often central to their success. Nevertheless, rights—especially in politics—remained intimately connected to social responsibilities. This meant that at the end of the century all adult women, a significant minority of men and all individuals receiving poor relief were denied the right to vote. Crucially, the expansion of rights was not considered to be inevitable or necessary, but instead it was fundamentally linked to changing ideas about the

proper relationship between the state, the household and the individual.

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