

# **The Woman's Congress of 1899**

Charlotte Perkins Stetson

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ANOTHER great meeting of women has been held in London this time, where an International Congress was in session from June 26 to July 5. The opinions passed upon it are various and amusing, and a source of mild mirth to the careful thinker. It is hard to say what apocalyptic visions of perfection the observers must have had in mind to justify their criticism. Here was a meeting of the International Council of Women, their second quinquennial, celebrated by this vast congress.

The congress was composed of delegates to the council, members of the congress, and invited speakers. It is estimated about three thousand women were present. The meetings lasted over a week, and were held sometimes five at once; in all, fifty-seven regularly announced meetings, and many others of a more or less correlated nature. Speakers from all quarters of the globe were brought before the congress, and many of the leading movements of the day were discussed. The five main sections of the congress work were the educational, professional, legislative and industrial, political, and social. Under these heads many subsections were grouped, with numerous papers on different topics for each subsection.

In the educational section, for instance, were treated in one day, "The Child, Life and Training"; (a) "Psychology of Childhood," (b) "Parental Responsibility," (c) "Education as a Preparation for Life," (d) "Connection Between Home and School Life," (e) "The Kindergarten," (f) "Teaching of Mentally and Physically Defective Children." Under these heads were given sixteen papers, and much discussion *viva voce*. The program was long and varied, treated with much care, and representing the views of leading men and women in these lines, as far as they could be brought together. Day after day the halls were filled with eager listeners. Every seat was filled at every session, and standing room was always occupied. Many were turned away, or overflow meetings were held for them. The newspapers were in the main respectful and gave full reports of the proceedings and of the discussions.

Among noted personalities from America as speakers, were Susan B. Anthony, hailed with enthusiasm wherever she went; Rev. Anna Howard Shaw, Mrs. Stanton Blatch, Mrs. May Wright Sewall, Mrs. Annie Jenness Miller, Mrs. Maria Purdy Peck, Mrs. Felix Adler, Miss Sadie American, Dean Louise Brownell but catalogues of names are tedious reading, and this is but a beginning. Professor Patrick Geddes was there he who is the author, with Arthur Thompson, of that interesting and valuable work, "The Evolution of Sex" and who is trying to preserve the beauty of "the Auld Toon" in Edinburgh from The Castle to Holyrood.

Mme. Antoinette Sterling was there, our wonderful contralto, whom England has loved so long; the first Doctor of Laws from Germany, Anita Augspurg; the first woman physician from Holland, Dr. Aletta Jacobs, of Gršnigen; fascinating Mme. Shen, of the Chinese legation; Flora Annie Steele, author of "On the Face of the Waters," and this, too, is getting to be a schedule of names. There were present women of international distinction, and women known only in their own lines of work, but most honorably distinguished therein.

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another from our own country, Miss Lavinia Dock; all on "The Professional Training and Status of Nurses"; by virtue of their experience in that one line they meet here and touch elbows, or shake hands if they please, with other women distinguished in science, in art, in the drama, in horticulture, or what not; and all by virtue of their work are invited to great houses and entertained by great ladies, even asked to Windsor by the Queen!

Here is something from which to take courage. Women, just plain women from anywhere, by virtue of doing something, and by reason of organization, become the guests of countesses and duchesses — if they wish; and meet with their own peers from all across the world. Some complained of lack of cordiality, said they did not find themselves met and greeted as they would have liked. That depends largely upon the individual. Do not wait to be greeted — greet! Go, enjoying, approving, welcoming; and if you do not meet the same spirit, at least you do not notice it. Here were all these noted women from everywhere, and all, as members of a common work, were privileged to speak.

One could seize upon Dorothea Klumpke of San Francisco, first woman to win the degree of Doctor of Science at the Academie des Sciences in Paris, head of a department in the Observatoire, one who is a credit to her country and her sex in these lines, — one could go right up to her and tell her so, if one chose; or to any one else whose name was familiar and honored.

It was not only at the sessions that we met. All London opened its doors to us. Receptions, luncheons, garden parties, teas, entertainments, official, semi-official and unofficial, public and private, were profusely offered. Those who disputed in the morning over some moot point upon the platform, could agree in the evening over the beauty and grace of the Duchess of Sutherland, or the kindness and amiability of the Countess of Aberdeen. The Bishop of London and Mrs. Creighton (would that some title might be given to a bishop's wife, or that he kept his name — she always seems such an unaccountable companion, as if one said, "The Duke of Pyecroft and Mrs. Jones") — the Bishop and his wife gave a garden party for us at Fulham Palace, and another and more sumptuous one was given by the Baroness de Rothschild and Mrs. Leopold Rothschild at Gunnersbury Park. This was of a truly oriental magnificence, reminding one of fairy-tales in its profuse splendor. The Duchess of Sutherland gave a reception at Stafford House, — the finest private house in London, — Lord and Lady Battersea another, and the Countess of Aberdeen received and co-received and lunched and otherwise entertained the Congress, beside her constant presiding, till one marveled at her steady sweetness.

It was a great week — a week of stir and bustle and weariness, a week of accumulated impressions to last a lifetime. Men came, the captious, and criticized it. They said it was "mismanaged" — will some one kindly write a handbook on "The Management of Women's Congresses, or How to Please Three Thousand Persons?"

What do they mean by "mis" managed? Does any one imagine that it would be humanly possible to meet all the personal requirements of these innumerable critics? Look at the amount of work that was done; the careful thought taken; the wonderfully full and accurate "Handbook," the "Who's Who at The Congress," with its portraits and biographical notes; the immense amount of printed material, giving lists of hotels and boarding-houses or lodgings, and an endless body of information; the carefully-filled-out directions as to the name, time, etc., of each paper; and that other with the address of one's "entertainer" and exact time of entertainment. Consider what was done, how much and how well — do not call a thing mismanaged because latecomers were not seated; or because certain speakers were not as good as others. Many complained of the different halls in which the meetings were held — of having to go from one place to another. That was London's fault, not that of the congress. The congress could not build a place suitable to the occasion, nor hire what was not to be had! London is in many ways an old-fashioned city, and her public buildings were erected before the day of women's congresses.

"There was too much undertaken," say the carpers. Too much for what? Who shall decide what a congress shall undertake? A congress is a representative body. If in trying to bring together representative women from all over the world and to put before the public their best thought, it came about that there was a tumultuous body of eager workers along many lines, all equally desirous of being heard, should the congress therefore cut them down in order to provide a neat and concise program to please the audience?

"The Public" are used to being entertained, and to having their entertainers cower before them and eagerly follow their whims. An international congress of women is not a form of entertainment, but a form of instruction. It seeks to show what the women of different countries are thinking and doing; and if in their present stage of advance they are thinking and doing many things partially, instead of a few things thoroughly, why the congress

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can but bring forth that fact. It is a record of the progress of women, and is most honest and most accurate when it shows them as they are. "The papers were so poor!" cries the critic — one accustomed, perhaps, to the work of the world's leading experts on these lines.

The papers were not poor. Some of them were very fine, many good, a few rather trivial. The reading was poor, I grant, in many cases. But public speaking, by either sex, is not made a fine art; and there is no reason why a leader in astronomy, or architecture, or nursing, should also be an expert orator. Still, with all wish to be just and considerate, there is room here for honest criticism. Even without experience or natural gift, a woman who is addressing several hundred people should at least try to reach them. They would be more sympathetic if she tried.

And one thing there was in this congress, as in any other I have ever attended, that does call for blame, severe and unmitigated. That is the refusal of a speaker to stop when the time allotted has expired. A weak voice is forgivable, an embarrassed manner is natural to many; but when the audience has watched and waited patiently for the full time, why should she of the weak voice and the embarrassed manner insist upon further taxing their patience? Time was allotted beforehand. Each speaker knew that she had twenty minutes at most, or fifteen, or ten, as the case might be; and even if she had not the skill to cut her paper to these limits, she should, when the bell rung, have been sorry she could not condense better — and have sat down! But almost without exception the speaker was aggrieved and persistent, wrestling with the chairwoman for more time, and, when forced to retire, grumbling copiously. Can they not count? Is not the program before them? So many papers in so much time, so many minutes to each, everyone wanting to get through promptly and have time to eat! For every speaker that runs over someone else must be cut shorter, or the audience kept overtime. What gross selfishness, what discourtesy, or, at the very least, what thoughtlessness, to imagine that one's own particular paper is so much more worthy than all the others. Of course every enthusiastic speaker does think her subject of the first importance, and may think her treatment of it of superior value; but that should not weigh against common courtesy.

One of the best fruits of the increasing mobilization of women, and their freer speech, is the teaching of such large virtues as their home life has evidently failed to bring forth.

"And what, as a whole, has this congress done?" is naturally asked. "What is the good of it?" What did the critic expect? A meeting like this does not result in a series of legal enactments. It does not erect or endow or install. It teaches — teaches in a thousand ways, and starts great waves of impulse in a thousand hearts. The effects filter slowly through the lives of the people, impossible to follow and define.

Let us take one paper, and try to estimate some of its possible results; the paper on "Co-education," by Dean Louise Brownell, of Cornell University.

On its quiet simplicity, directness, clearness, easy mastery of the subject, and satisfying presentation of it, the paper itself and its perfect delivery constituted a good argument for "the higher education for women." Its claims for co-education, based on practical observation and experience, were so well established as to carry conviction to every unprejudiced hearer. Now to measure what follows. Let us allow, in that audience, some one person as finally convinced by that paper, and that one person as having a governing influence on the future management of some institution, and introducing co-education therein. Or let us suppose several persons in the audience so influenced as to send their sons and daughters to co-educational institutes. In either case — and both are probable — the good effects of co-education are spread and multiplied among us, with a slow, unmeasured increase of good.

To put it even more loosely — the whole weight of that meeting was in favor of co-education, and must have acted, to some extent, on the prejudices of those present. It constituted one of the series of efforts by which advanced methods are slowly incorporated in our general life.

The world moves by means of some people's seeing farther than others and gradually inculcating their ideas in the minds of the others.

Every means by which these advanced ideas can be more swiftly and generally distributed is a help. These congresses are such a means and an enormous help. Now that the best thought of the world points to a fuller internationalism as our racial line of progress, everything is of service that establishes community of interest and feeling among members of different races. Women, the home-centered, the conservative, the all too narrow and personal class, — these most need to know each other. All organizations of women tend to lift the world, and this is especially true of international organizations. Human progress is not to be measured by a series of clearly defined, separate achievements, clear-cut water marks by which we can say, "in this period we rose so far" — but

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by the increase among us of those measures which we have proven to be beneficial, however far removed into the future, and however faint may seem their benefits.

When English piety and conservatism grapple with such a subject as the social necessity of an equal moral standard for men and women, the hopeful thing is that they are studying it at all, in spite of the possible errors in method. When the session on temperance gives half its time to "General Principles," and the other half to "Public Control of the Liquor Traffic," it speaks more hopefully for that cause than if it were still at the crusading stage; and the fact that one session was devoted to "Protection of Bird and Animal Life" promises some good along this line, even though aigrettes "are sold more than ever"!

It is what the women of the world are trying to do that counts. The direction of their efforts, the improvement of their methods — these are the important facts; and the fact that their efforts may be mistaken and their methods imperfect is but the natural condition of life.

The progress marked by this great congress is extensive and valuable; and the amount and quality of executive ability brought to bear upon it, most gratifying. Twenty-seven countries were represented in the council, besides eight international societies — for peace, for abolition, for temperance, and the international union of press clubs, of "the Friends of Young Girls," the world's "Y. W. C. A.," the International Order of King's Daughters, and The General Federation of Women's Clubs.

A splendid showing was made of the specific advance of women in the arts, crafts, trades, and professions. Hot discussions were held on various questions specially prominent today in England, notably on the subject of "Special Labor Legislation for Women." The servant question presented its usual amorphous front — showing every sign of difficulty and decay, yet bolstered up by sentiment and tradition in full force. (Why are women so convinced that certain trades are better practised by amateurs than by professionals?)

An immense suffrage meeting was held in Queen's Hall during the congress, well attended, well managed, and well addressed. Our dear Miss Anthony was the great attraction here, as everywhere else she showed her grand white head. And what endears Miss Anthony to all hearts, quite in addition to the splendid qualities we all know in her, and what constantly surprises those who do not know her personally, is her cleverness, grace, and tact.

And Miss Anthony went to see the Queen — standing waiting in the hot sun till the royal carriage appeared and drove slowly down the line of waiting delegates. She wanted to see the woman whose reign has meant so much to England; and it is to be hoped that that much-honored lady felt how much these uncrowned heads and noble hearts were doing for the world.

Of congresses of women, the more the better — of internationalism the more the better. There is good hope for our dear world when its mother wakes up.

CHARLOTTE PERKINS STETSON. London.