‘MORE THAN A WOMAN ON A PLINTH’: COMMEMORATING LADY RHONDDA AND RECOVERING NEWPORT’S HIDDEN HERITAGE

Dr Sharon Thompson

Reader, School of Law and Politics, Cardiff University

1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between women’s history and statues is complicated. Historians of the women’s movement are well-practised in recovering women’s pivotal yet often ignored role in shaping law, politics and society. Just as the importance of women’s activism can be side-lined from institutional histories of reform, the relatively small number of statues of women similarly serves as a reminder that those seen as the ‘elites’ throughout history are predominantly men. Across Britain, of more than 800 statues, only 128 are of named non-royal women.[1] This dearth of female representation is particularly striking in Wales.[2] Many statues of women are mythological or allegorical, often partially clothed or even naked. They are anonymous, unnamed. The organisation ‘Monumental Welsh Women’ is now seeking to correct this through the erection of five statues commemorating Welsh women.[3] The focus of this public history project is currently on a statue for Lady Rhondda in Newport; a fundraising campaign is underway and the maquette – a miniature version of the statue – was revealed in March 2023.

As well as exploring the importance of this public history project as a means of recovering Newport’s hidden heritage of feminist activism, this piece considers the relationship between representing women through statues and feminist biography. The design of Lady Rhondda’s statue provides the opportunity to explore not only the reasons why

women should be commemorated, but also how this commemoration might take place. The first half of this piece addresses the *why*: I consider why Lady Rhondda was identified as worthy of commemoration in Newport, as well as why the campaigns to erect statues of women matters more broadly. The second half of this piece reflects more upon the *how*, considering the artist's decisions in relation to her design of Lady Rhondda and how this links to feminist biography. Indeed, writing Lady Rhondda's history is quite different from sculpting her in bronze, for as Pippa Catterall has put it, statues, 'by their emphases and absences, distort history as much as they inform it'.[4] Thus, in correcting the near complete absence of statues representing women's achievements throughout history in Wales, this risk of distortion – and connection with women's history – must be confronted.

2. THE CAMPAIGN TO COMMEMORATE LADY RHONDDA

In recent years, the people of Newport have begun to celebrate their city's connection to suffragette and prominent businesswoman Lady Rhondda (also known as Margaret Haig Thomas). In 2015, thanks to community-based efforts of a group of Newport women, a blue plaque was erected on Risca Road next to the post-box Lady Rhondda set on fire in 1913 (for which she was arrested). Lady Rhondda, who grew up in Llanwern House on the outskirts of Newport, had been an active member of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), and was honorary secretary of Newport's WSPU branch. She travelled across Wales mobilising women (and a few men) to the cause. She is therefore an important part of Newport's heritage, and was deemed an apposite subject of the Monumental Welsh Women campaign.

As a wealthy married businesswoman of the early twentieth century – a time when the marriage bar often excluded women from gainful employment – Lady Rhondda was an

outlier.[5] She sat on the boards of 33 companies and became the first female president of the Institute of Directors in 1926. She was the also the first woman to hold a hereditary peerage, though was barred from taking up her seat in the House of Lords – something that was not permitted until four years after her death in 1963.

Importantly, the work of historians has uncovered Lady Rhondda's life story beyond her professional success.[6] Thus, Lady Rhondda is remembered not as a solitary pioneer, but as a leading figure during a pivotal time in women's history. Commemorating her involvement in the women's movement is therefore important, because it enables us to radically rethink what counts as achievement, while uncovering stories of women that have long been neglected.

One of Lady Rhondda's vital achievements was her push for further reform immediately after landmark changes to women's rights in the early twentieth century. The notion that votes for women meant equality had been achieved was severely misguided. Lady Rhondda was clear that the Representation of the People Act 1918, which gave the vote to women over 30 who met a property qualification, was just the beginning.[7] She believed it was crucial to continue campaigning for women's equality, not just in relation to voting rights but in all spheres. A year after the 1918 Act, the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919 enabled women to enter professions such as solicitors, barristers, magistrates and civil servants for the first time. Now that women were no longer excluded from parliament, these reforms ostensibly meant Lady Rhondda could take up her hereditary peerage and sit in the House of Lords. But her entry was blocked, she lost her court case challenging this, and she was never able to sit in the Lords.[8] In spite of reform, the law continued to let women down.

Lady Rhondda mobilised women to push for change. On 17 February 1921, she established the Six Point Group (SPG), a pressure group comprised of women able to vote at the time to work towards equal rights for women through legal reform. As their name

suggests, they targeted six issues at a time, and once they had achieved as much as they could in one area, another issue would take its place. The activities of the SPG were publicised in *Time and Tide*, a ground-breaking feminist periodical which Lady Rhondda founded, owned and edited.[9] The SPG asserted important influence, raising awareness of issues related to equal pay, reform of the law on child assault, and the rights of housewives.[10] It remained active even after Lady Rhondda's death, and it spawned several other groups significant to the women's movement in the mid-twentieth century. In 1937, it established a subgroup that became the Married Women's Association, which had a profound influence on married women's property rights throughout the twentieth century.[11] Women for Westminster also rose out of the Six Point Group, an organisation established to 'train women for political life, and to assist female candidates at general elections'.[12]

While all of this underscores why Lady Rhondda is an important figure within women's history, the question of why she should be commemorated by a statue is a different, albeit related, matter. Catterall has argued that statues represent a dialogue between past and present, but do not represent history itself.[13] Indeed, the toppling of the statue of slave trader Edward Colston in 2020 sparked important questions about what statues are for, and how they contribute to public understandings of the past.[14] Many statues, like Colston's, were created in the nineteenth century as honorific symbols of power, with the implication that the men depicted are worthy of emulation. Those representations of power and authority are now rightfully being questioned. Within this context, Catterall's analysis makes sense. For, as she notes, Colston's statue represents a complicated conversation between celebrating him in the past as a hero, and dealing in the present with his legacy of violent imperialism: 'It was not history that was in play with Colston's statue, but what people chose to interpret his statue as representing about the values and nature of Britain's society today'.[15]

But what of statues of women – made by women – with the express purpose of making visible a community's feminist heritage? Retrieving Newport's hidden heritage opens a new dialogue between the community of women in Newport campaigning and fundraising for the statue of Lady Rhondda, the female sculptor designing and creating the statue, and the future generations of Newport who will pass the statue on their daily commute. While this is not quite *the same* as doing women's history, it does help to highlight the importance of Lady Rhondda to the history of Newport, and by extension, the importance of women's history more broadly.

Memorialising women could thus be used as a vehicle for normalising women's history. The campaign for the Lady Rhondda statue is connected to lessons on her legacy and networks being produced for Welsh school children. The publicity surrounding the statue has also shone a light on her work and of the activities of the WSPU in Newport. However, because there are so few statues of women in Britain, and even fewer statues memorialising feminist activists, it is difficult to tell whether this will raise public consciousness of women's history long term.

There is evidence to suggest the women within Lady Rhondda's networks were ambivalent about being memorialised through the erection of statues. But there is also indication that when the women of these networks were *not* memorialised, they were forgotten. One example of this is Dorothy Evans, who, like Lady Rhondda, had been a militant suffragette, led Lady Rhondda's SPG throughout the 1930s, and was instrumental in the women's movement throughout the early twentieth century. When she died in 1944, funds were raised for her memorial, but were ultimately absorbed by the SPG. Evan's partner Sybil Morrison, who was also prominent within the women's movement, expressed her deep regret about this in a transcribed conversation with fellow SPG member Hazel Huskins-Hallinan:

> …we had the money after Dorothy died. There was quite a large sum of money which was for a memorial for her. And foolishly as I think we decided to continue her work. This is a fatal thing because it disappears – something goes wrong, and you've no memorial. There's no memorial to Dorothy Evans. There was some £1500 collected from all the country and the world. I thought I'd buried these miseries.[16]

That the work of Dorothy Evans – a leading feminist figure of her day – faded into obscurity within Sybil Morrison's lifetime, shows how easily women can be 'disappeared' from history.[17] This process of disappearance has been explained by Susan Geiger: 'Women's political actions and history are 'disappeared' in a cumulative process whereby successive written accounts reinforce and echo the silence of previous ones'.[18] There is no way of knowing whether a memorial for Evans would have been enough to prevent her disappearance – leaving women historians to recover and reconstruct her memory. But Morrison's palpably painful recollection suggests a potentially important role for memorials of feminists, in positing a direct challenge to the erasure of the work of feminist activism from historical record. Nevertheless, the power of the statue's mere existence may not be enough. The design of the statue, and the story it can convey, matters too.

3. MORE THAN A WOMAN ON A PLINTH

As this piece has acknowledged so far, statues represent history, but are not history and indeed have the potential to distort it. This is why the maquette can be as important as the statue itself. First, this section considers why a statue's design risks presenting a superficial account of women's history and second, it explores how the designers of the statue of Lady Rhondda[19]

have sought to avoid some of these pitfalls by including several narrative pieces of her life story.

3.1. STATUES AND THE 'HEROINE TRAP'

In their case for feminist legal history, Erika Rackley and Rosemary Auchmuty warned historians to avoid the 'heroine trap'.[20] This trap presents 'inspirational women' who succeeded against all odds, and such pioneer narratives have pitfalls: 'The danger is that if you set out with the intention of casting someone as a heroine or a role model, you are going to craft a life story to suit' – a fiction that can obscure difficult personalities, fractious relationships and success tempered by setback.[21] When constructing statues of women, such heroine narratives are tempting. Many figures sit high on plinths, with an imposing and powerful presence; they are both literally and metaphorically placed on a pedestal. This distance from the public often makes details of their life story impossible to view, contributing to a simplified narrative.

Statues also have the potential to distort women's history because they crystallise particular individuals as focal points within the women's movement. Landmarks in feminist history cannot be explained by one heroine, or event, or idea. Just as progress tends to be neither steady nor united, feminist histories are inherently complicated, and are often fragmented by intellectual and cultural difference. The celebration of individuals through statues could be seen as aligning with traditional biographies and legal histories, which have often been characterised as the 'study of great or exceptional people'.[22] Yet this is a mould into which few women neatly fit.[23] Focusing on the pioneers of the women's movement skews the reality of collective activism.

Thus, while the statue of Lady Rhondda is designed to inspire, it also risks entrenching further these superficial narratives about women's history. This is one reason why its unorthodox design is so interesting.

3.2. THE DESIGN

The statue's sculptor, Jane Robbins, has named her design of the Lady Rhondda maquette 'The Figurehead' [Fig. 1.]. This is because the statue will lean forward at a 45-degree angle, like the figurehead of a ship, representing her survival from the sinking of the RMS *Lusitania* in 1915. According to Angela John, this event 'altered how people chose to see' Lady Rhondda,[24] with Octavia Wilberforce describing her as a 'romantic figure, for she had been torpedoed in the *Lusitania* and such a miraculous escape seemed to mark her out for a special destiny'.[25] Her survival 'against the odds'[26] plays into the narrative of Lady Rhondda as a 'heroine'. However, although a pitfall of the heroine narrative is that other stories are lost, Robbin's design, in consultation with Monumental Welsh Women and the Statue for Lady Rhondda Campaign goes beyond representing Lady Rhondda's achievements as an isolated individual. Other aspects of the statue ensure the importance of her work within networks is acknowledged. Lady Rhondda *was* a figurehead; in her leadership of *Time and Tide*, the SPG and the campaign for female peers in the House of Lords. The figure in the maquette represents these important elements of her life story. Lady Rhondda is depicted holding a copy of *Time and Tide*, wearing a suffragette sash, and stands on a steel base, reflecting Newport's local industry as well as her role as one of the few female industrialists of her day.[27]

Perhaps most notably, Robbins was clear that she did not want this representation of Lady Rhondda to be 'just another woman on a plinth with a suffragette hat'.[28] In contrast with traditional statues on plinths, the statue of Lady Rhondda will be approximately seven-feet (life and a quarter). Robbin's intention is for it to be 'imposing, but not too monumental to be overbearing. I want her to be accessible and engaging to the people of Newport'.[29] The

hoop behind the statue will be made of life-cast hands of women involved with the project,[30] symbolising the unity of the Newport women's movement of which Lady Rhondda was part. This link to the present community activism of Welsh women is important. By including the hands of women from the Statue for Lady Rhondda campaign, as well as Lady Rhondda's biographer Angela John, the statue symbolises not just the importance of Lady Rhondda, but also the importance of women's history today.

4. CONCLUSION

While the debate around toppling statues of men in recent years has generated opportunities to question the often-sanitised stories about their lives, the creation of statues of women conversely has the potential to bring women back into history, acknowledging their often hidden, yet important impact. Even if it is unclear whether a statue is ever capable of preserving women's history in all of its richness and nuance, the Lady Rhondda statue does at least present a physical, seven-foot bronze barrier in front of that cumulative tide described by Geiger, whereby women can be written out of history and replaced by dominant, androcentric narratives.[31] The unorthodox approach to the design of the Lady Rhondda maquette goes beyond simply depicting a likeness of the person being commemorated, instead revealing aspects of her life story and the feminist networks of which she was part. When the statue is built, it will not encapsulate the complete history of Lady Rhondda, but it will mediate an important conversation between past and present about the importance of women's history and the need to acknowledge the feminist heritage of Newport.

Fig. 1. Maquette of Lady Rhondda by Jane Robbins, St Woolos Cathedral, Newport, 6 March 2023. Author provided.

---

[1] The Public Statues and Sculpture Association, 'UK Public Statues of Women', https://pssauk.org/women/ (accessed 2 May. 2023).

[2] A bust of Lady Mary Cornelia Vane-Tempest, Marchioness of Londonderry was initially erected in Machynlleth: https://www.coflein.gov.uk/en/site/707002 (accessed 2 May. 2023).

[3] The first statue associated with the campaign was erected in Cardiff in September 2021, and depicted Betty Campbell (the first black head teacher).

[4] Pippa Catterall, 'On statues and history: the dialogue between past and present in public space', British Politics and Policy at LSE, 2020 https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/statues-past-and-present/ (accessed 2 May. 2023).

[5] Helen Glew, *Gender, Rhetoric and Regulation: Women's Work in the Civil Service and the London County Council, 1900-55* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016).

[6] Angela John, *Turning the Tide: The Life of Lady Rhondda* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2013).

[7] Ibid., 367.

[8] Muriel Mellown, 'Lady Rhondda and the Changing Faces of British Feminism', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 9/2 (1987), 7-13, 9.

[9] John, *Turning the Tide*, 285.

[10] Ibid., 368.

[11] Sharon Thompson, *Quiet Revolutionaries: The Married Women's Association and Family Law* (Oxford: Hart 2022).

[12] Laura Beers, 'Women for Westminster,' Feminism, and the Limits of Non-Partisan Associational Culture' in *The Aftermath of Suffrage: Women, Gender, and Politics in Britain, 1918-1945*, eds. Julie Gottlieb and Richard Toye, (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2013), 224-242.

[13] Catterall, 'On statues'.

[14] Saima Nasar, 'Remembering Edward Colston: histories of slavery, memory, and black globality', *Women's History Review*, 29/7 (2020), 1218-1225.

[15] Catterall, 'On statues'.

[16] Women's Library, Hazel Huskins-Hallinan, Interview with Sybil Morrison, 26 Oct. 1971, 5SPG/M10.

[17] Jean Allman, 'The Disappearing of Hannah Kudjoe: Nationalism, Feminism, and the Tyrannies of History' 2009 21(3) *Journal of Women's History*, 13-35, 15. Morrison died on 26 April 1984.

[18] Susan Geiger, *TANU Women: Gender and Culture in the Making of Tanganyika Nationalism, 1955–1965* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997), 10, cited in ibid., 15.

[19] The design was a community effort between sculptor Jane Robbins and groups within Newport, including the Youth Parliament Steering Group.

[20] Erika Rackley and Rosemary Auchmuty, 'The case for feminist legal history', *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies,* 40/4 (2020), 878-904, 897.

[21] Ibid., 897-898.

[22] Barbara Caine, 'Feminist biography and feminist history', *Women's History Review,* 3/2 (1994) 3 247-261, 250; see also Kate Murphy, 'Feminism and Political History', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 56/1, (2010), 21-37. 24.

[23] Ibid.

[24] John, *Turning the Tide*, 135.

[25] Manuscript copy of Octavia Wilberforce's autobiography 'The Eight Child', 228, in Angela John's possession and as cited in ibid., 135.

[26] Ibid.

[27] As noted by Julie Nicholas in: Monumental Welsh Women, 'Press Release: Design for Statue of Suffragette Lady Rhondda Revealed in Newport', 6 March 2023.

[28] Speech at St Woolos Cathedral, 6 March 2023.

[29] Monumental Welsh Women, 'Press Release'.

[30] Including Helen Molyneux, chair of Monumental Welsh Women, and Julie Nicholas, chair of the Statue for Lady Rhondda campaign.

[31] Allman, 'The Disappearing', 15.