

## AMAZONS, SCIENCE AND COMMON SENSE: THE RULE OF WOMEN IN ELIZABETH CORBETT'S *NEW AMAZONIA*

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### *Abstract*

Elizabeth Corbett's *New Amazonia: A Foretaste of the Future* (1889) imagines what the late-Victorian world would look like if it were run by women. Inspired by the *Women's Penny Paper*, a pro-suffrage journal devoted to showcasing women's writing and interests, Corbett used utopian fiction to explore an alternative to the patriarchal values of Victorian England. The women of New Amazonia live in a future Ireland where their freedom from restrictive clothing and other limitations imposed on women has turned them into seven-foot-tall athletic goddesses. The highest posts in the all-female government are reserved for a cadre of celibate women and reproduction is controlled through Malthusian measures and eugenics. Corbett sees a combination of science and common sense as being the key to the health and prosperity of the New Amazonians. In this study I will explore the appeal of scientific progress to late Victorian feminists, and the role of science in shaping hopes for an improved society. I will argue that rather than being a utopian dream, Corbett's vision for an alternative Ireland was grounded in her experiences as a wage-earner and suffrage campaigner, and in her involvement in the alternative women's subculture built up around the *Women's Penny Paper*.

Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett may have situated her fictional country run by women in an alternate future version of Ireland and populated it with seven-foot-tall women calling themselves New Amazonians, but, as I will argue in this paper, her version of utopia is far from being a fantasy wish-fulfilment, and is deeply engaged with contemporary issues, science and personalities. Utopian fiction has been described by Lyman Tower Sargent as 'social dreaming',<sup>1</sup> but in many cases, the dreams are not so much dreams as detailed blueprints for social change. Nineteenth-century writers of utopian fiction were serious about their dreams. Indeed Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888) spawned a whole movement for social change in the form of 'Bellamy Clubs'. Corbett, too, is quite specific in her dreaming. In her utopian novel *New Amazonia: A Foretaste of the Future* (1889), she maps out a society which would eradicate disease, extend life-spans, improve prosperity and showcase women's ability to take part in public life. This study will argue that the polemical power of Corbett's foray into utopian fiction derives from her frequent references to contemporary female role-models and her use of science and scientists to increase the plausibility of the technology behind the improvements she describes. Her confidence that women, if given the opportunity, could achieve this progress is all the more remarkable for taking place at a time when biology was being used to question

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<sup>1</sup> Lyman Tower Sargent, 'The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited', *Utopian Studies*, 5 (1994), pp. 1-37 (p. 4).

women's ability to transcend what were perceived as natural constraints. However, Corbett allied science with the concept of common sense, which she saw as a female attribute, to lay claim to a female-centred science which could be used to demonstrate believable alternatives to the male-dominated institutions of Victorian Britain and support the concept of women making a better job of government than men.

My exploration of these issues will focus on Corbett's involvement in a community of women drawn together by the *Women's Penny Paper*, a pro-suffrage journal devoted to showcasing women's writing and interests. The paper was founded in 1888 by the feminist Henrietta Müller, who advertised it as 'The only Paper Conducted, Written, and Published by Women'. Its aim was to support the cause of suffrage by providing a newspaper for women that would give them an opportunity to voice their thoughts and get more involved in public life. The *Women's Penny Paper* appeared on a weekly basis between 1888 and early 1891 when it changed its name to the *Woman's Herald* which Müller ran until April 1892.<sup>2</sup> The pages of the *Women's Penny Paper* contained profiles of prominent women, news about women's achievements as well as a lively letter column containing letters from readers, often writing under a variety of pen-names such as 'Eloisa' and 'Minerva', or simply initials. Müller promoted participation from readers through offering advertising space for goods and barter services at substantially lower than commercial rates, as well as encouraging readers to come up with ideas to increase circulation.<sup>3</sup> Müller's deliberate attempt at building social involvement through the pages of the *Women's Penny Paper* paid off in the case of Elizabeth Corbett, who found in the paper both an inspiration and an audience for her explorations of what a country run by women would look like. In contextualising *New Amazonia* within this community I also hope to provide a more optimistic slant to critic Matthew Beaumont's description of the gap in late nineteenth century feminist utopias 'between the fantasy of collective social harmony [...] and the lonely individual consciousness of the woman writer'<sup>4</sup> by showing that for Corbett at least the like-minded community of women already existed, and that in writing *New Amazonia* she was to a large extent writing for this far from fantastical community. By linking Corbett to *The Women's Penny Paper* this study can also offer a counter-example to Darby Lewes's interpretation of late-nineteenth century feminist utopian fiction as 'the literature of dissatisfaction',

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<sup>2</sup> See Rosemary T. Van Arsdel, 'Mrs Florence Fenwick-Miller and "the Woman's Signal", 1895-1899', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 15 (1982), pp. 107-18 (p. 109); Elizabeth Gray, 'Poetry and Politics in the *Women's Penny Paper/Woman's Herald*, 1888-1893: "One Swift, Bright Fore Gleam of Celestial Day"', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 45 (2012), pp. 134-57 (pp. 136-7).

<sup>3</sup> See Michelle Tusan, *Women Making News: Gender and Journalism in Modern Britain, The History of Communication* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), pp. 109-18.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Beaumont, *Utopia Ltd.: Ideologies of Social Dreaming in England, 1870-1900* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), p. 90.

predominantly concerned with expressing women's frustration over political exclusion.<sup>5</sup>

Corbett began her career as a writer in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne in the early 1880s, where she contributed to the *Newcastle Daily Chronicle* and wrote a number of novels under her married name of Mrs George Corbett.<sup>6</sup> These were not universally well-received. For example, one reviewer wrote of Corbett's 1895 detective novel: 'When the Sea Gives Up Its Dead Mrs George Corbett's book of that name will be appreciated - but not until then',<sup>7</sup> while the *Saturday Review* described *Deb O'Malley*, Corbett's tale of a mill girl who marries a bigamist as 'drearily, conscientiously bulky'.<sup>8</sup> However, *Hearth and Home* listed Mrs George Corbett alongside Conan Doyle as one of the masters of the art of the detective novel,<sup>9</sup> and the *Women's Penny Paper* described the fantastical novel, *Pharisees Unveiled* (1889) as 'clever and entertaining'.<sup>10</sup> *New Amazonia* was not the only one of Corbett's novels to deal with the position of women in society. *Mrs Grundy's Victims* (1893) concerned two women victimised by gossip and middle-class hypocrisy, and *The Marriage Market* (1903) highlighted the problems of marriage brokers operating a form of legalised prostitution.<sup>11</sup> Corbett herself wrote in a letter to the *Women's Penny Paper*:

I have seldom written anything in which I have not taken the opportunity of airing some of my views regarding the consequences meted out to erring women, in opposition to the popular treatment of equally or more guilty men. Until lately, however, it has been very uphill work to fight against social usages. I remember when a few years ago I published a three volume novel, entitled 'Cassandra,' a writer in the Academy [...] expressed his astonishment at the idea of 'anyone, much less a lady, having the bad taste to make an open allusion to such a subject as man's immorality!'<sup>12</sup>

*The Women's Penny Paper* certainly made a strong impact on Corbett, who wrote in the same letter: 'A weekly perusal of the *Women's Penny Paper* has shown me that

<sup>5</sup> Darby Lewes, *Dream Revisionaries: Gender and Genre in Women's Utopian Fiction, 1870-1920* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995), pp. 57, 73.

<sup>6</sup> See Duangrudi Suksang, 'Overtaking Patriarchy: Corbett's and Dixie's Visions of Women', *Utopian Studies*, 4 (1993), pp. 74-93 (p. 76).

<sup>7</sup> [The Haughty Culture-ist], 'Leaves. To Be Left - or Gathered', *Fun* (15 January 1895), p. 26.

<sup>8</sup> Anon., 'Deb O'mally's', *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* (19 October 1895), p. 514.

<sup>9</sup> Anon., 'People, Places and Things', *Hearth and Home* (1 June 1893), p. 72.

<sup>10</sup> Anon., 'Reviews', *Women's Penny Paper* (3 August 1889), p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Anita Rose, 'Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett's *New Amazonia*: Gender Equity, Science, Utopia', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, (1997), pp. 6-20 (p. 18).

<sup>12</sup> George Corbett, Mrs, 'Letter', *Women's Penny Paper* (30 November 1889), p. 66.

others are brave enough to denounce existing evils, and has encouraged me in my determination to write unflinchingly, in at least one book [*New Amazonia*], about many things that have often roused my indignation.’ Corbett clearly felt at home in this subculture as she wrote another, more controversial letter criticising Queen Victoria for not recognising women in the New Year’s honours list, and a chatty article on her experience of canvassing with the Newcastle Women’s Liberal Association in the 1890 local elections.

The strength of Corbett’s identification with this community of women was demonstrated by her involvement in the protests that ensued when the *Nineteenth Century*, a monthly literary magazine, published an article entitled ‘An appeal against female suffrage’ in the June 1889 issue. This anti-suffrage petition was signed by over a hundred women, many of them aristocrats or wives of prominent men, claiming that ‘the emancipating process has now reached the limits fixed by the physical constitution of women’.<sup>13</sup> In response, over two thousand women, including Corbett, signed a petition for the rival periodical the *Fortnightly Review* protesting against the article, forcing the *Nineteenth Century* to print some examples of the contrary view in letters from Millicent Garrett Fawcett and Mrs Ashton Dilke. The *Penny Paper* also joined in the debate by pointing out the difference in social circumstances between the largely upper class signatories of the appeal against suffrage and the middle-class women who were fighting to get the vote:

Those who stand on the middle rung of the social ladder [...] have a wider view and a more helpful experience; these see, in middle-class and artizan life, women taking their full share in the work of the world, they see them exact and scrupulous in money matters, careful managers of house and business and school, home-stayers while husbands are wasting their substance in riotous living, breadwinners for father-deserted children, for parents and brothers and sisters.<sup>14</sup>

Corbett openly aligned herself with the viewpoint of the *Women’s Penny Paper*. In the prologue to *New Amazonia*, which is devoted to the *Nineteenth Century* article, she declared that she was one of the signatories of the ‘gallant counter-protest’ which was ‘signed by the cream of British WOMANHOOD’ rather than the ‘ladies’ of the *Nineteenth Century* magazine who supported ‘the most despicable piece of treachery ever perpetrated towards woman by women’.<sup>15</sup> This issue was clearly important to

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<sup>13</sup> Humphry Ward, Mrs, ‘An Appeal Against Female Suffrage’ *The Nineteenth Century*, 25 (June 1889), pp. 78-87.

<sup>14</sup> Anon., ‘Women’s Suffrage in the *Nineteenth Century*’, *Women’s Penny Paper* (22 June 1889), p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett, *New Amazonia: A Foretaste of the Future* (London: Tower Publishing, 1889), pp. 7, 1. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

the genesis of *New Amazonia* as Corbett uses the protest as a springboard for her venture into utopian fiction. The narrator falls into an enchanted sleep after imagining women's rights campaigner Mrs Weldon as speaker of the House of Commons, and activist and birth control advocate Mrs Besant as Prime-Minister. When the narrator wakes up, she is in New Amazonia. Corbett does not dwell on the mystery of the enchanted sleep, which appears to be mainly a plot device to speedily transport her protagonist to New Amazonia, without losing the polemical energy of the opening section. Instead, Corbett spends her opening chapters establishing the origins of the New Amazonian state from its roots in nineteenth-century Ireland to a war which depopulated Ireland, leaving it open for colonisation by the excess women of England. There is nothing fantastical about the state. It is not in a geographically unreal nowhere like Butler's *Erewhon* or More's *Utopia*. It is located in a future Ireland, but with place names, such as Fawcetville, Beecherstown and Andersonia, which reference prominent women of Corbett's own time. *New Amazonia* has more affinity to Bellamy's future Boston of *Looking Backward*, published a year earlier, except that Corbett's references to the present day signal that utopia could be achieved now rather than a hundred years in the future, if the talents of women in the population were recognised. In fact, Corbett's alternative future provides a more convincing rationale for change than Bellamy's, where the somewhat theoretical forces of social evolution are used to bring about political changes. For Corbett, all that is required is the opportunity for women to set up their own state and the subsequent improvements will inevitably stem from there. Chris Ferns contrasts Bellamy's 'relentless specificity of detail regarding the workings of the more perfect society' to the 'equally telling lack of detail concerning the process whereby it came into being'.<sup>16</sup> Corbett, on the other hand, not only provides details of the historical and political developments which led to the founding of New Amazonia, but unlike other writers of feminist utopias even describes the funding model for the new state.<sup>17</sup>

Corbett's utopia is also remarkable for showing an all-female government of a country containing both men and women, not a separatist state like Mary Bradley Lane's *Mizora* (1880-1) or Gilman's *Herland* (1915), where the absence of men inevitably dilutes the impact of the female government. Moreover, Corbett's depiction of the New Amazonian government as politically astute and competent is very different from previous satirical examples of female rule where women are portrayed as inept at governing, as for example in Walter Besant's *The Revolt of Man* (1882) where female supremacy leads to stagnation and oppression. Corbett draws support for the assumption that women will make a better job of government than men by citing the real-world example of Oskaloosa in Kansas where the all-woman

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<sup>16</sup> C.S. Ferns, *Narrating Utopia: Ideology, Gender, Form in Utopian Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), p. 80.

<sup>17</sup> Darby Lewes notes that in the context of feminist utopias 'funding for these projects is rarely discussed' (p. 62).

government was enthusiastically re-elected because, as Corbett put it, ‘within twelve months the place had made such wonderful strides in the trifling matters of social morality, sanitation, and prosperity, that it is the wonder of surrounding towns’ (p. 131).

Corbett’s tactic of using the success stories of her female contemporaries to increase the plausibility of her all-women state was very similar to Müller’s approach in the *Women’s Penny Paper*, where each issue contained a featured interview with a successful woman who could act as a role model to her readers. These interviews included many of the women referred to in *New Amazonia*, the first three being Millicent Garrett Fawcett, Mrs Ashton Dilke and Mrs Annie Besant, as well as women involved with a wide variety of activities such as artists, doctors and a stockbroker. The *Women’s Penny Paper* also tracked news on women in public life and indeed published an article about Oskaloosa under the suggestive title of ‘A City Governed by Women’ in November 1888.<sup>18</sup> Lewes talks of ‘middle-class women’s overwhelming frustration [...] with the apparent failure of the suffrage movement’, their marginalisation and bitter disillusion,<sup>19</sup> but there is very little of these sentiments apparent in the pages of the *Women’s Penny Paper* or in *New Amazonia*. Müller herself was very optimistic about the prospects for improvements in women’s rights, stating in an interview published in 1891, that she looked forward to ‘an immediate future for women of the widest freedom’.<sup>20</sup> Gretchen Quiring argues that the focus on women’s suffrage in histories of the women’s movement often downplayed the advances women were making in local politics and party political associations, which were exactly the kind of achievements being highlighted in the *Women’s Penny Paper*.<sup>21</sup>

Science was another source of optimism in *New Amazonia*. Like Bellamy, Corbett saw scientific developments as universally positive – at least in the hands of women. Corbett emphasised the plausibility of her scientific imaginings by grounding her ideas in the work of nineteenth-century scientists, mentioning such names as Robert Koch, Louis Pasteur, Austin Flint and Charles-Édouard Brown-Séquard. Koch and Pasteur are revered in Corbett’s utopia for their work on bacteriology, which led to the eradication of a whole range of infectious diseases. Flint was celebrated for predicting a revolution in medicine, and Brown-Séquard was the inspiration of for *New Amazonia*’s rejuvenation programme (p. 91). Corbett’s interest in Brown-Séquard might be semi-autobiographical as her unnamed narrator-protagonist claims: ‘I had once met a gentleman who had attended his initiatory lecture in Paris on ‘The Art of Not Growing Old’ (pp. 79-80). Brown-Séquard experimented on prolonging

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<sup>18</sup> Laura Johns, ‘A City Governed by Women’, *Women’s Penny Paper* (24 November 1888), p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Lewes, *Dream Revisionaries*, pp. 44, 57.

<sup>20</sup> Anon., ‘Interview’, *Woman’s Herald* (28 November 1891), p. 915.

<sup>21</sup> Gretchen Lynn Quiring, ‘Petticoat Government: Female Rule in British Fiction, 1870-1890’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Victoria, Canada, 2003), p. 11.

youth by injecting extracts of animal's testicles into himself, but Corbett adopted a sanitised version of the process for *New Amazonia* in which nerve extracts are taken from animals without doing them any harm. The real-world origins of Bändiger, the power of instantaneously arresting sense and motion, are less easy to trace, though the word is German for animal tamer, and may even relate to the kind of mesmerism that propelled Julian West into the future in *Looking Backward*. On the other hand, Schlafstrank, a potion for initiating a healing sleep, was probably inspired by experiments in developing anaesthetic, but is credited with being invented by a female scientist from New Amazonia, Ada of Garretville, in 2239. Corbett also talks about the potential for diet to cure not just medical conditions, but also 'mental and moral failings [...] by means of a wise and judicious selection of food' (p. 92). Her fascination with medical cures appears still to have been strong in 1905 when she provided an endorsement for 'the famous nerve tonic' Phosferine, saying that it 'possesses far and away, beyond any other preparation, really phenomenal Nerve Restoring and Vitalising properties'.<sup>22</sup>

Corbett's delight in science is all the more impressive because it occurred at a point in time when science was also being used to oppress women. In 1869, John Stuart Mill argued in *The Subjection of Women* that 'What we now call the nature of woman is an eminently artificial thing',<sup>23</sup> but in the two intervening decades, Mill's logical and rational arguments for the lack of difference between the two sexes were being undermined by a new more consciously scientific approach to the subject.<sup>24</sup> Many felt that gender was innate, positing that women's nature was circumscribed by physical laws. Anthropologists linked women and savages together as examples of a more primitive stage of evolution, while craniologists like Paul Broca measured skulls and assumed a direct correlation between size and intelligence. Even where inferiority was not taken for granted, the idea of differences between men and women was underpinned by a conviction that certain characteristics were innate to women's nature and could not be changed. In *The Evolution of Sex*, published in 1889, the same year as *New Amazonia*, Geddes and Thomson argued that 'man thinks more, woman feels more. He discovers more, but remembers less; she is more receptive, and less forgetful'.<sup>25</sup> Geddes and Thomson attributed the differences between the two genders to cell biology, claiming that male cells were katabolic and dissipated energy, while female cells were anabolic and preserved energy.

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<sup>22</sup> Anon., 'Display Ad 3', *The Manchester Guardian* (2 January 1906), p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> John Stuart Mill, *The Enfranchisement of Women [with] the Subjection of Women* (London: Virago, 1983), p. 38.

<sup>24</sup> Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 12-13.

<sup>25</sup> Patrick Geddes and J. Arthur Thomson, *The Evolution of Sex* (New York: Humboldt, 1890), p. 250.

There was certainly an awareness of these arguments within the community of the *Women's Penny Paper*. An article entitled 'Science and Women' commented on the fact that Grant Allen was trying to use science to attack the women's movement and oppose higher education for women, but described his attempts as inspired more by 'scientific imagination' than 'scientific research'.<sup>26</sup> In another article entitled 'Moral Vivisection' Mrs Alfred C. Osler complained that generalisations about the nature of women were being used to argue against the efficacy of education for women. Women are characterised as incapable of intellectual labour or impartial judgements and resistant to facts or truth. Osler, however, rejected the idea of there being any sound evolutionary arguments against women attempting to work in whatever field they chose, enlisting natural selection to support her case:

[Women] are perfectly satisfied to leave Nature herself to point out by the success or failure of their enterprises, in what direction these capabilities and powers lie. What they cannot admit is that this function, so perfectly and unerringly performed by the law of Natural Selection, should be usurped by a fallible and partial authority; and that one-half the human race should define the aims and limit the aspirations of the other half.<sup>27</sup>

While Osler does not dispute that women's roles might be determined by nature, she forcibly rejects the idea of women potential being defined by men's construction of their nature. A similar dislike of being defined by men and masculine science comes through from another writer (simply calling herself 'An Odd One'), who remarks on the masculine bias of Darwin and Spencer's observations:

When first I read the works of Darwin and H. Spencer at college, I was very much struck by two things that I observed. One was that all the facts upon which their conclusions were based were either facts relating to males or such as would chiefly come under the observation of males. The second fact was even more surprising than the other, namely, they were both absolutely unsuspecting of their own want of logic, and perfectly unconscious of it. When they thought they were describing Humanity and Life, they were only describing Men, or Males, and they were unconscious that they had left out half the problem. This unwritten volume can only be contributed by women themselves. It is the literature of the future.<sup>28</sup>

This article highlights a consciousness amongst women involved with the *Women's Penny Paper* that the writing of science was a gendered activity, and that it was

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<sup>26</sup> Anon., 'Science and Women', *Women's Penny Paper* (30 August 1890), p. 530.

<sup>27</sup> Alfred C. Osler, Mrs, 'Moral Vivisection', *Women's Penny Paper* (8 December 1888), p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> Anon., 'Oddments by an Odd One', *Women's Penny Paper* (28 December 1889), p. 118.

important for women to contest the masculine-centred discourses of science. Yet, as the article by Osler shows, natural selection could be seen as a positive force for women. As Angelique Richardson has argued, Darwin's emphasis on individual cases and ongoing change spoke against the pigeonholing of women within fixed stereotypes and offered hope for the kind of female empowerment being discussed within the *Women's Penny Paper*.<sup>29</sup>

Corbett herself did not have much time for masculine constructions of women, writing in *New Amazonia*:

'To be "only a woman" was equivalent in the minds of many male egotists to being only "something better than his dog, and something dearer than his horse" and yet, no sooner did she prove herself gifted with abilities hitherto cherished as exclusively masculine, and therefore infinitely superior to womanly attributes, than she was said to have become "masculine" and regarded as an object of horror'. (p. 36)

In *New Amazonia*, Corbett offers a picture of female evolution as it might occur if untrammelled by the negative environment and culture of Victorian society. The women of *New Amazonia* are nearly seven feet tall and built like goddesses. They enjoy good health and youth till well over a hundred years of age, and freed from restrictive clothing and lack of exercise, they are athletic and strong. These descriptions express Corbett's strong conviction that given the appropriate environment, there would be no limitation on what women could achieve. The key to Corbett's attitude to science can be seen in one of her comments on Koch and Pasteur: 'the world at large looked upon their discoveries as only interesting from the scientists' point of view, failing to recognise that a gigantic revolution in medicine was impending' (p. 91). In other words, science is important to her more as a practical tool for improving everyday life, than as pure research for its own sake. Tellingly, science is allied with common sense by the leaders of *New Amazonia*. When the narrator comments on the disappearance of infectious diseases, her guide replies: 'We have heard of such evils [...] but science and common sense united have combated them effectually' (p. 90). Science and common sense are also linked together in relation to the practical clothing adopted by the women of *New Amazonia*: 'science and common sense had united in forming a costume in which the requirements alike of health, comfort, and beauty had reached their acmé' (p. 11). It could be argued that is it this combination of 'science and common sense' which positions science as a specifically female force within *New Amazonia*. Male scientists have made discoveries, but women have provided the common sense application to the details of day-to-day life. Anita Rose in her commentary on *New Amazonia* also

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<sup>29</sup> Angelique Richardson, 'Against Finality: Darwin, Mill and the End of Essentialism', *Critical Quarterly*, 53 (2011), pp. 21-44.

sees ‘common sense’ as a female force, proposing that the ‘pure science’ arising from the increasing professionalization of science at the fin de siècle ‘was often set as a rational masculine domain against what one would be tempted to call a more feminine sensibility or ‘common sense’.<sup>30</sup> Rose argues that Corbett develops a feminist version of science which sets itself up against a patriarchal scientific ethos: ‘Science is respected, but it has been put in its place, implying that in Utopia, the masculine values of nineteenth-century science must also be marginalized. If a scientific or technological tenet is perceived as working against community, it is outlawed in New Amazonia, progressive seeming or not.’<sup>31</sup> However, this analysis underrates Corbett’s appropriation of science as an all-purpose tool to tame and control the utopian space of New Amazonia:

Electricity was made so thoroughly subservient to human will that it supplied light, heat, and powers of volition, besides being made to perform nearly every conceivable domestic use. So well were the elements analysed and understood here that thunderstorms were unknown, and the force which yearly used to slay numbers of people was now attracted, cooped, and subjugated to human necessities. (p. 60)

The scientific dream of controlling nature has been adopted by the female scientists of New Amazonia, and used in the service of women’s ideals for a safer, healthier world.<sup>32</sup> In New Amazonia food is ‘scientifically perfect’ and tooth decay has been eradicated because the ‘exact chemical constitution of the bone is known’ (p. 89). Weather is controlled for the good of all through ‘altering the direction of a steady wind and thereby producing either wet or fine weather, by means of a huge artificially created vacuum.’ (p. 53)

Even marriage and family life are subservient to science, with proto-eugenic measures being implemented, such as the requirement for a ‘medical certificate of soundness’ before marriage. More controversially, Corbett also recommended the examination of newborn children to ensure that ‘no crippled or malformed infants were permitted to live’. Clearly she saw such measures as being in the interest of the state, despite running counter to maternal instinct, as represented by the ‘very painful scenes’ witnessed during these examinations (p. 46). However, in the absence of effective birth control or safe abortion, many of the poorest women in Victorian

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<sup>30</sup> Anita Rose, ‘Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett’s *New Amazonia*: Gender Equity, Science, Utopia’, *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 40 (1997), pp. 6-20 (p. 19).

<sup>31</sup> Rose, ‘Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett’s *New Amazonia*’, p. 10.

<sup>32</sup> Corbett’s vision of women controlling nature is the main way in which she fails to conform to Jane Donawerth’s definition of female-centred utopian science. See Jane Donawerth, ‘Utopian Science: Contemporary Feminist Science Theory and Science Fiction by Women’, *NWSA Journal*, 2 (1990), pp. 535-57.

England were forced to resort to infanticide to cover up illegitimacy or lack of resources to support additional children.<sup>33</sup> In the context of a society where there was an excess of unwanted children, Corbett's measures to remove those least suited for survival might seem like 'common sense', however it also suggests a eugenic concern about the hereditary transmission of defects. Although the term eugenics was not coined until 1883, and eugenics only established as a social movement in the first decade of the twentieth century, the hereditarian principles that underpinned the movement were in practice throughout the Victorian era and earlier. John C. Waller argues that there was a shift in the late-nineteenth-century from a focus on individual marriages to concern over the social impact of hereditary factors on the health of the nation as a whole.<sup>34</sup> Corbett describes the children of New Amazonia as being the property of the State, and in this sense is taking the kind of impersonal stance, or as Waller puts it 'population-level gaze' which came to be associated with eugenics and a professionalized science more concerned with statistics than individuals.<sup>35</sup> However Corbett justifies this materialistic focus on health through positing an intrinsic connection between health and spirituality. In New Amazonia more spiritual progress can be made whilst alive than after death, so it is important to prolong life, meaning that 'one of the surest ways of reaching heaven is to cultivate the health and perfection of the body'. Conversely, once the body is no longer healthy, spiritual advancement becomes impeded, and so the New Amazonians practise euthanasia to 'liberate the spirit without any wasteful delay' (p. 73). A similar policy is applied to those who are deemed incurably insane. This approach allows Corbett to maintain an ethical rationale for the actions of the state while applying the precepts of modern science.

Corbett does not choose to make any changes to the process of reproduction, as for example, Charlotte Perkins Gilman would in her 1915 feminist utopian novel *Herland* where the women reproduce by means of parthenogenesis. Grant Allen described woman as 'the sex sacrificed to reproductive necessities',<sup>36</sup> but Corbett's New Amazonians evade this fate by bribing the brightest and best not to reproduce: 'Our laws and social economy hold out wonderful premiums for chastity, and the result is that all our most intellectual compatriots, especially the women, prefer honour and advancement to the more animal pleasures of marriage and re-production of species' (p. 81). In this respect, Corbett's utopia is very different from Bellamy's

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<sup>33</sup> See Christine L. Krueger, 'Literary Defenses and Medical Prosecutions: Representing Infanticide in Nineteenth-Century Britain', *Victorian Studies*, 40 (1997), pp. 271-94.

<sup>34</sup> John C. Waller, 'Ideas of Heredity, Reproduction and Eugenics in Britain, 1800-1875', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part C: Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*, 32 (2001), pp. 457-89.

<sup>35</sup> Waller, 'Ideas of Heredity, Reproduction and Eugenics', p. 469.

<sup>36</sup> Grant Russell, 'Woman's Place in Nature', *Forum*, 7 (1899), qtd. in Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 4.

future Boston of *Looking Backward*, where ‘the higher positions in the feminine army of industry are intrusted only to women who had been both wives and mothers’.<sup>37</sup> Gilman too promotes the value of motherhood in *Herland*, where the best, most gifted women are honoured with the opportunity of becoming mothers, while in Lane’s *Mizora* the leaders of her matriarchal utopian state claim that ‘the MOTHER is the only important part of all life’.<sup>38</sup> For Corbett, though, it was ‘the maternal instinct’ rather than motherhood itself that counted in her model for a state where the constitutional relationship would be ‘less that of rulers and ruled, and more like that of mother and children’ (p. 130). Duangrudi Suskang suggests that Corbett emphasised the value of celibate single women to counteract ‘her contemporaries negative attitude toward unmarried women who were regarded as redundant’.<sup>39</sup> Lewes also notes a difference in attitude to motherhood between British and American feminist utopian fiction: ‘British heroines effect change by rejecting their traditional roles as wives and mothers and modifying established political structures such as Parliament; American heroines employ their own reproductive power as an instrument of social change’.<sup>40</sup> Corbett saw a role both for the active, political woman, choosing a career over child-bearing and for mothers, who in New Amazonia were offered ‘as much public homage’ as the unmarried career women (p. 81), though it is interesting that she did not imagine a place for professional women like herself who were both mothers and wage-earners.

Beaumont describes New Amazonia as ‘a eugenicist fantasy’,<sup>41</sup> but, in effect, Corbett is reversing the usual eugenic paradigm of encouraging the most intelligent to breed. Instead the most gifted women are reserved for a kind of priesthood of the intellect, while the women of lesser talents settle for marriage. Corbett was more interested in limiting the population, than choosing which sections should be encouraged to breed. One reason for offering disincentives for marriage is to maintain a stable population, and avoid ‘the ineluctable evils forced on other States by over-population’ (p. 81). Parents of over four children are ‘punished for such recklessness by being treated as a criminal, and deprived of very many valuable civil rights’ (p. 47). This policy is enforced in accordance with ‘Malthusian doctrines’, which in the late nineteenth century signified the kind of contraceptive measures promoted by campaigners for rational reproduction such as Annie Besant, one of Corbett’s role models. Malthusianism, which was about restricting the number of births, had a different focus from eugenics where women’s role was not to restrict births, but to

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<sup>37</sup> Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 153.

<sup>38</sup> Mary E. Bradley Lane, *Mizora: A World of Women* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), p. 103.

<sup>39</sup> Suskang, ‘Overtaking Patriarchy’, p. 81.

<sup>40</sup> Lewes, *Dream Revisionaries*, p. 71.

<sup>41</sup> Beaumont, *Utopia Ltd.*, p. 124.

select the best men to improve the standard of future generations. However, by the early twentieth century, eugenics and Malthusianism began to converge, with Malthusians using the public interest in eugenics to promote their agenda, even though the eugenics movement did not give official support to birth control methods till after the First World War. Karl Pearson, the first Professor in Eugenics argued that Malthusian teaching ‘reaches only the thoughtful and prudent, and leaves the task of reproducing the community more and more to the bad stock’.<sup>42</sup> There were also divisions in the women’s movement over the use of birth control, with many women associating contraception with prostitution and promotion of excessive sex indulgence. In the *Women’s Penny Paper* ‘Minerva’ complained about ‘Neo-Malthusians [...] asking wives to adopt the nostrums of courtesans’ when the real problem is that ‘maidens accept impure husbands’.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, Henrietta Müller, the paper’s editor, opposed measures to restrict free access to birth control information and argued in favour of ‘preventive checks’ in preference to continuous childbearing.<sup>44</sup> Corbett’s main interest was in leaving women free to develop their public role by avoiding marriage and sex completely, but her advocacy of limits on family size suggests that she was also in favour of the use of contraceptive measures.

The *Women’s Penny Paper*’s review of *New Amazonia* showed no concerns about the book’s eugenics or proposals for birth control and concentrates on its positive aspects for women, reading it as ‘an amusing satire on present conditions, and a forecast of the future’.<sup>45</sup> While it is true that Corbett seemed unaware of the coercive impact of some of her common sense measures, she was obviously convinced that equality, female governance and the sweeping away of corrupt nineteenth-century laws and institutions would inevitably lead to a better world. She could confidently assert that *New Amazonia*, with its aims of ‘[h]ealth of body, the highest technical and intellectual knowledge, and purity of morals’ could ‘boast of being the most perfect, the most prosperous and the most moral community in existence’ (p. 47). Within the context of the community of the *Women’s Penny Paper*, *New Amazonia* can be read as a manifesto aimed at an existing audience rather than a wistful dream for the future. Corbett does not indulge in grandiose schemes to remodel society, which remains a middle-class capitalist state where wealth, health and the individual good are the strongest elements. Instead she focuses on what women could achieve if they used science and common sense to run society. In this respect, she is reflecting back what she has observed of women as breadwinners and

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<sup>42</sup> Letter from Karl Pearson published in *The Malthusian* (January 1900), p. 4, qtd. in Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: Feminism, Sex and Morality* (London: Tauris, 2001), p. 238.

<sup>43</sup> [Minerva], ‘Letter’, *Women’s Penny Paper* (6 July 1889), p. 10.

<sup>44</sup> See Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, pp. 195, 19.

<sup>45</sup> C.A. Dawson, ‘Reviews’, *Women’s Penny Paper* (28 December 1889), p. 118.

the inspiration of women's achievements highlighted in the *Women's Penny Paper*. During the short period when the *Women's Penny Paper* was published, it provided a platform for female-centred debate and gave women like Corbett the confidence to express their opinions about the inequalities of nineteenth-century society, contest negative constructions of women's nature, and formulate ideas about what a society run by and for women might look like. Far from being an expression of dissatisfaction over frustrated hopes, *New Amazonia* offers evidence of how feminist utopian fiction played a positive part in the dialogue over women's rights and supported a continuing argument for suffrage and greater representation of women in public life in the late nineteenth century.

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