

## A Tale of Two Women: Frances Power Cobbe and Anna Kingsford

Roberta Kalechofsky, Ph.D.

Women became prominent in the Antivivisection movement in the Victorian Age, and their emergence in this movement has been remarked on and analyzed in several books, particularly, *"The Old Brown Dog: Women, Workers and Antivivisectionists in Edwardian England,"* by Coral Lansbury. This bond is buried in the intricacies of the times, which Coral Lansbury examines: a hostility to the medical profession, which often used the bodies of the poor taken from their graves, for dissection; the use of the female body for sexual examination: gynecology made its appearance at this time and while women flocked to take advantage of this new discipline, examinations were unnerving and pictures of dogs pinned to an examining table, with their legs splayed open reminded women of their own predicament; the abusive treatment of poor women in the clinics and hospitals. (Anna Kingsford, who became a doctor---and Elizabeth Blackwell, the first American woman to become a doctor in 1865, have documented these abuses). The new promising medicine had an abusive aspect for women, animals, and the poor. It is noteworthy that many of the prominent leaders of the Antivivisection movement in the latter half of the Victorian age began as feminists and changed course of direction to put their crusading energies into the Antivivisection movement. A noticeably strong current of identification between women, animals, and the poor emerged, so that the Antivivisectionists were often accused of being "communists," while many belonged to the upper classes. But other anti women epithets of the day were hurled at them: they were irrational, they were anti science, they were moved by "mere sentiment." This position was summed by Elie de Cyon, a prominent physiologist at the time in a news paper letter.

Among the women who led the Antivivisection cause, Cobbe and Kingsford were outstanding--but in irreparably different ways: Cobbe finally dismissed Kingsford, and cut off relations with her. Kingsford was a vegetarian; Cobbe was not; Kingsford was statuesque, beautiful, and passionate, and had left her husband (with his permission) to go to medical school in Paris. Cobbe was practical, understood politics, knew how to work a petition, had organizational abilities which she proved with the establishment of the BUAV. Ultimately--and ironically--it was propaganda attacks on women as "sentimental" "anti science," "irrational" "obscurant" a woman like Kingsford less effective, and doomed any partnership between Cobbe and Kingsford.

She was an improbable creature who would have strained credibility as a character in a novel. She was beautiful with masses of golden hair, resembling the ideal Pre-Raphaelite woman. She

was intellectually brilliant, a passionate and idiosyncratic personality, a writer and an extraordinary orator. Her book, *The Perfect way, or The Finding of Christ*, originally given as a talk, made no apologies for classical allusions and tightly packed lengthy philosophical arguments. Yet she held audiences spellbound. Kingsford commanded her stage with the combination of oratorical energy and the physical impact of statuesque height, which contrasted with the Victorian esthetic of female delicacy. Her audiences claimed her as a "goddess," a "prophetess," and spoke of her

John Vyvyan, the author of the two social histories of vivisection and Anti-Vivisection, *In Pity and In Anger* and *The Dark Face of Science*, recounts that Edward Berdoe, a member of the Royal College of Surgeons, described Anna "as the most learned, the most beautiful, and the most spiritually-minded woman he had ever met."

Her considerable assets were offset by a lifelong battle with poor health and almost continuous pain from childhood from facial neuralgia, asthma, lung problems and perhaps a mild form of epilepsy. Her illnesses and nervous instability, her intense inner emotional life, an eclectic intelligence and an abhorrence of cruelty, created her character and thoughts, and created them in opposition to the philosophical currents of her day, which were shaping the modern world. In spite of almost continual physical pain and a nervous system which found it unbearable to countenance pain in other creatures, such energies and love of nature coursed through her that she spoke of her life as "this stupendous existence." Indeed it was, in the impact she had on her contemporaries.

She had a prescient sense that she would not live long enough to write all that she wanted to. She was also often subject to ridicule because she claimed to have psychic powers. Frances Power Cobbe, who founded the British Union Against Vivisection and helped pass the first vivisection reform bill in England in 1875, should have been her natural ally, but was horrified by Kingsford's appeal to Theosophical and "irrational" arguments in her criticism of science and modern medicine. Cobbe was determined to prove that hostility to animal research was scientifically sound, and feared that arguments based on "sibylline prophecies" would encourage the opposition to denounce Anti-Vivisection as Luddite irrationalism. Not being a vegetarian, Cobbe had other reasons for opposing Kingsford, including Kingsford's iconoclastic life. Her opposition to Kingsford was treacherous for the Anti-Vivisection movement, to which they both gave their lives.

Kingsford's approach to animal research stemmed from a broader critique of science than Cobbe's. Kingsford was by no means a Luddite or anti-intellectual, but she sympathized with women such as Madame Blavatsky, who argued that human beings are guided by psychic forces as well as by intellect. She also believed, as did many other Anti-Vivisectionists of her time, that animal research would open the door to atheism because it denied vitalism as the source of animal life. Her criticism had been foreshadowed by theological arguments in the 17th century when the Cartesian "beast-machine" first made its appearance. Leonora Cohen Rosenfield, in her book, *From Beast-Machine to Man-Machine: Animal Soul in French Letters from Descartes to La Mettrie*, points out that Fromondius, Jansensus' successor to the chair of philosophy at the University of Louvain, argued that "it is blasphemous to attribute such excellent actions as occur in beasts to such a humble cause as mechanism." The problem of the animal soul had vexed Europeans until the earnest practice of animal research began in the 19th century; afterwards arguments about the "animal soul" were no longer regarded as respectable theological or philosophical subjects. Descartes had equated "soul" with "reason" and that seemed to end the issue. Voltaire, however, had pointed out that soul had nothing to do with reason, for one would not say that when a human being ceases to reason he ceases to have a soul. He argued that God creates nothing in vain; therefore animals cannot be machines. As Rosenfield points out, "The dispute about the nature of animals has been and remains a favorite battleground in the eternal war between vitalists and mechanists."

Kingsford was a profound vitalist who believed that all matter was infused with spirit. The physiologists were committed mechanists. Kingsford's effort to find footing in a world which increasingly disbelieved and ridiculed claims to psychic or spiritual forces honed her willpower as well as her search for a religion and a philosophy that would allow her to reconcile herself as an intellectual woman and as a clairvoyant in a world which both ridiculed intellectual women and was increasingly dominated by rationalism and science. "The spirit of the age" was decidedly contrary to her personality and values which eventually found their home in the Theosophical society, where she became the president of the British branch. Here she is still regarded as a prophetess and her books continue to be read.

Within her august and often mystifying personality, Anna Kingsford became a nexus for several dominant issues in the last decades of the nineteenth century: the rise of the Woman's Movement, and the rise of both animal research and medical materialism. These issues are expounded in her major works, *Dreams and Dream Stories*; *The Perfect Way in Diet*; *The Perfect Way, or The Finding of Christ*, her autobiography, letters and diaries in *The Life of Anna Kingsford*; and her feminist allegorical interpretation of religions and the Bible, *Clothed With The Sun*. These continued to appear posthumously for a few years after her death in 1888. Thereafter, obscurity overtook her.

Paradoxes beset her career as an Anti-Vivisectionist and a Feminist. Her considerable contribution to the Anti-Vivisection movement was rebuffed by Frances Power Cobbe; her feminist writings can only be had through the filter of her companion, Edward Maitland, and by understanding the arcane, allegorical method they both wrote in.