

“A World Fellowship”: The Founding of the International Lyceum Club for Women Artists and Writers

by

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On 20 June 1904, an alien invasion disrupted the complacent fraternity of London’s clubland. Bus passengers passing the former building of the British Imperial Service Club in central London craned their heads at the spectacle of *women* on the club’s balconies, and in its great bow windows. All the leading newspapers reported this remarkable event, for not only had the women infiltrated the sanctuary of a male club, they had actually taken the premises, and established their own exclusive society. The International Lyceum Club for Women Artists and Writers, as they called themselves, flourished over the next few years. It earned itself a prestigious reputation, and set up sister clubs throughout Europe and the British dominions. It became, as you know, a social and cultural centre for women all over the world, and the present gathering bears witness to its success.

- 128 Piccadilly

I am showing you here a picture which I took recently of the original London clubhouse. Looking at its magnificent façade, it is easy to imagine the excitement and ceremony surrounding the club’s inauguration. One hundred years later, it also makes us wonder what gigantic purpose could have motivated the Lyceum to acquire it? Who was behind the venture, and in what circumstances did the club first operate?

The Lyceum was not the only women’s club in Britain at that time – far from it. From about 1880, women’s-only clubs began to proliferate. In 1882, there were just two advertised in London. In 1900, that number had risen to twenty one, and in 1906, it peaked at thirty six. They catered for all interests and social classes, from aristocrats to actresses, university lecturers to city clerks. Their sudden popularity bore witness to women’s changing aspirations, and their willingness, if not to challenge, at least to match, the Victorian institution of the gentleman’s



club. How then did the Lyceum compete in this expanding market? What did it have to offer that was different, and how did it manage to fill the imposing halls of its London home?

The Lyceum was remarkable, I believe, because it combined the gravitas of a respectable institution, with the reforming zeal of a political pressure group. It conducted a campaign for women's rights and international cooperation that threatened to disrupt the British Establishment, yet itself became a feature of the Establishment. No one can dispute its success as an institution. I would like to emphasise here its progressive vision.

An advertisement placed in *The English Woman's Yearbook* of 1910 highlights the features which were meant to distinguish the Lyceum from all other women's clubs. The *Yearbook* was an annual publication listing all the professional and recreational resources available to women. It was here, then, that the Lyceum competed for women's attention. It was, the notice claimed, no ordinary social club, for it provided a unique information bureau to advise women about their careers, a permanent art gallery, and, pre-eminently, an international network of club-houses across Europe. The club therefore offered an attractive synthesis of women's emancipation, culture, and cosmopolitan contact. The idea of Miss Constance Smedley, the club's founder was (I quote from the advertisement) 'to establish centres of intellectual and artistic life' throughout the world, and thereby to 'promote interchange and thought between the cultured women of all nations'.

That emphasis on Smedley's personal vision draws our attention to the character of the woman who began it all.

- Constance Smedley

Constance Smedley was born in 1876 in the industrial city of Birmingham, in the British midlands. Her father was a wealthy businessman, her mother a cultured woman who was decorated by the French government for her services to Anglo-French relations. Smedley grew up, then, in a home that encouraged women to take an active interest in the Continent. She herself showed early talent as an artist. She became a star student at Birmingham School of Art, and at sixteen had her first illustration published in a national journal. However, her interests soon shifted toward the theatre, where she again achieved rapid success as a playwright. When she was in her early twenties, her family moved to London, where she embarked on a promising career as journalist and novelist. Her severe physical handicap, probably caused by childhood polio,



rarely prevented her from pursuing her ambitions, or from attracting admiring attention. In her prime, she impressed her friends as (I quote) ‘a radiant personality’ who ‘never saw any reason why one should not attempt the biggest project his mind could hold’. This studio photograph of her as a young woman projects a sense of her theatrical extravagance and warmth.

Smedley’s early publications analysed the dilemmas of modern womanhood with wit and perception. I would recommend in particular an essay entitled *Women: A Few Shrieks!*, an extravagant feminist polemic published in 1907; also the lively journalistic dialogues collected in a book called *The Boudoir Critic*, issued in 1903; and *An April Princess* together with its sequel *The June Princess*. *An April Princess* was her first and most successful novel. Its exuberant intelligence marked her out as a rising talent on the British literary scene, and critics applauded it as (I quote) ‘one prolonged flash of brilliancy’, ‘the champagne of youth, originality, cleverness and self-confidence’. The story, in part autobiographical, concerns a young woman who lives a fantasy life as a princess. She rules over her own private kingdom of friends, while treating with charming disrespect the rules of society. The book’s publication in 1903 coincided with the founding of the Lyceum. Six years later its sequel, *A June Princess*, appeared just as Smedley was preparing to leave the club. The two volumes therefore serve as stage-posts along the route of her career, the first proclaiming the literary ambitions of a young author, the second meditating, more soberly, on her experience of public life.

It was her unhappy experience at a London club for women writers that motivated Smedley to begin the Lyceum. Many of the women who belonged to the Writers’ Club were poor, struggling to maintain a show of respectability while making an impact in their profession. The club offered the women a bare minimum of hospitality which Smedley, demonstrating the vision and audacity that would take her far, demanded they increase. When the governors scorned her proposals for a more lavish service, she set about founding the Lyceum as a rival intellectual institution. The problem, as she saw it, was that professional women stood at a disadvantage to their male colleagues, who could entertain in style at their club or at home. At home, single women risked compromising their reputation. At the Writers’ Club, the food was an embarrassment. The Lyceum therefore provided a meeting place which allowed women to compete equally with men in their working lives. As Smedley put it in her memoirs: the club ‘was intended to be a corporate social home for educated women, wherein women of small or large incomes could feel part of the aristocracy of intellect, and come into free and helpful contact with men and women from all over the world’.

The Lyceum’s solid, institutional presence allowed it to negotiate controversial feminist debate with tact and decorum. It was able to reconcile traditional models of womanhood with radical new ideas about women’s liberation, giving professional women a passport to respectability at a time

when many objected to their working outside the home at all. Contemporary argument centred on the notion of ‘separate spheres’, the public sphere of paid work and government belonging to men, and the private sphere of the home, to women. Increasingly, women challenged this dichotomy, asserting their right to work, and forming organisations, such as clubs, which gave them a public presence. However, the Lyceum avoided any accusation of impropriety by presenting itself as an extension of the domestic sphere. On the occasion of the London club’s first birthday its Chairwoman, Lady Balfour, declared as follows that ‘we would have this Club, made by women [...] what we have always been proud that our British homes should be, as made by our women – places of good repute, places full of purity and high ideals’. Here, she disarms her critics by appropriating the language of home and morality. A woman’s club, she suggests, poses no threat to the status quo of female domesticity.

However, Smedley’s writing indicates that her own agenda was more daring. She fully intended the club to promote women’s suffrage, and she wanted to do away with the notion of separate spheres altogether. Women, she believed, should compete with men, not as women, but as professionals. As she put it wittily, ‘we cheerfully admit that we are just as human as men [...] and are universally deciding to come down to the level of his comrades and his equals’. She sought not only to support women, but to free them from the limitations imposed by the idea of femininity. Although the Lyceum gave sanctuary to women artists, it refused to protect their art within the critical arena. Smedley counted herself successful when she could record in the club journal of 1905 that they were ‘beginning to drop the fatal catchword “women,” and to talk of “excellent work” rather than “excellent woman’s work” ’.

Her novel *On the Fighting Line*, published in 1915, explores the problems of gender stereotype that the Lyceum sought to transcend. Minnie Blunt, Smedley’s heroine, embodies the contradictions, disadvantages and illusions against which modern women had to battle. She scrapes a menial living as a secretary, but dedicates herself to work with passionate idealism. She lives in a dingy garret, but papers the walls with pin-ups of male heroes. Her idolization of what she terms ‘real men’, epitomised by Mr Richard, her manly young employer, redeems an otherwise dreary existence. Minnie and Mr Richard begin an office romance but the affair, fuelled by romantic delusions, turns sour. The couple’s expectations of one another are unworkable, and Minnie discovers that her aspirations as a modern, working woman are incompatible with her conventional ideal of men and relationships. Her desire to follow in the footsteps of her heroes unnerves Mr Richard. As she records in her diary, after their first kiss, ‘he hates women to be unwomanly and he will have to kiss all the hardness in me away’. Although herself a single working woman, she clings to the principle that, as she puts it, ‘true men give women everything and work for them’, but when Mr Richard

offers to support her, she feels demeaned. As the stab of reality punctures her fantasies, Minnie discovers that happiness had awaited her all along in her next-door neighbour Jack, an unmanly writer who attends Suffragette rallies. His contempt for the traditional roles of men and women alike makes him, in Minnie's words, 'the one man for whom marriage wouldn't be a perpetual strain, but just a happy, interesting companionship'.

The reality of the domestic sphere, argued Smedley, was for the most part one of exploitation without protection. As Minnie puts it, 'men aren't to be trusted with so much power. It isn't good for them. They can use it to make things comfortable for themselves, not to protect the weak.' Women should be allowed to work, not as did most out of bare necessity, but for the dignity and satisfaction it could give them. As Smedley put it: 'a remarkable thing is happening [... Woman] is not only learning to earn her living, but she is learning to enjoy work.' Here, she adds her voice to a growing body of opinion which demanded respect for working women. *The English Woman's Yearbook* of 1882, for instance, prefaced its catalogue of professional resources available to women, with a polemic defending their right to make full use of them. A woman's employment, it claimed, could 'give a zest and dignity to life, unknown to the idle and the pleasure-seeking'.

The Lyceum advertised itself as a unique resource for women whose work had become their vocation, yet it also made strategic allowances for the pursuit of pleasure. Its magnificent premises lent it an aristocratic aura. Although it insisted that it was not just another luxurious social club, it courted high society patronage, making use of existing social structures in order to build a better habitat for the new class of women professionals. The participation of the social élite was necessary because they had the time and resources to devote to club work, while lending the Lyceum valuable prestige. Those who qualified for membership included not only women artists, writers and doctors, but also (I quote) 'the wives and daughters of distinguished men'. These mixed criteria might seem to bring into conflict the values of women's professional independence, and their dependence on men. It seems that in the early days, the clubs worked hard to satisfy disparate expectations. Smedley's letters home from Germany, written in 1904 when she was helping to establish a clubhouse in Berlin, comment revealingly on the juncture of upper and professional classes. 'We are getting the court circle to take up the club', she reported on 9 June, and wrote enthusiastically about her encounters with women such as the Countess Von Buhlow, Baroness von Sutton, and the Princess de Rohan, whom she described as 'the most beautiful looking woman in a lovely pale blue frock, very young with snow white hair and covered with wonderful diamonds'. She was overjoyed when the Countess von Groeber took charge of the social committee and made it her mission to eradicate any tension between what Smedley called 'the working members and society members'. She was determined, she explained, to 'fuse the elements', and 'make them feel all one sisterhood'.

That ambition to fuse and unify the Lyceum's various factions was central to Smedley's cosmopolitan vision. Her joyful belief in the unity of human nature fired her ambition to create a global network of sister-clubs, united by their common idealism. Perhaps the original Writers' Club was only being prudent when it dismissed what she described as her 'simple scheme of a world Club with Clubhouses in the world's chief capitals', for her ambition was, from the beginning, epic. As well as demolishing the ghetto of sexual discrimination, she aspired to create an international cultural organisation to promote world peace and democracy. Even before the Lyceum acquired its first premises in 1904, she had begun negotiating the formation of European centres, and she spent much of the next six years helping to set up clubs across the continent. Her novel *The June Princess* makes explicit the ideals which drove her to promote the club so relentlessly. The Princess is Smedley's *alter ego*, and in the opening scene we find her slaving away at the business of a fictional club through the heat of a summer's morning. A friend asks her how she can bear to work so hard for other people. 'It isn't for other people; it's for Internationalism,' she blithely replies. The club, she explains,

is really bringing the women of the different countries together, and making them understand how much they can do for one another [...] You see, it is such a sensible and beautiful idea to bind the world together.

She made this seemingly optimistic statement in 1909, five years before the outbreak of World War I. With hindsight, the shadow of that war lies across the founding of the Lyceum, placing it in the context of wider debates about war and peace, patriotism and internationalism. The early twentieth century was an age of change and turmoil, empire-building, and national consolidation. It was during the first decade of the last century that Britain first anticipated its long decline as a world power. The Boer War, which lasted from 1899 to 1902, exposed the weakness and unpopularity of the British empire, while Germany's increasing unity and strength left Britain vulnerable to attack. Defensive European treaties, battles in the Balkans, and an escalating arms race, generated a warlike mood. From the 1880s, British women became increasingly involved in supporting the British empire, setting up women's imperialist organisations such as the Ladies' Imperial Club, and the Victoria League.

At the same time, however, a counter-current of internationalist sentiment challenged the model of the war-like nation-state. From the late nineteenth century, international organisations began to proliferate, aiming towards the creation of an international community. The peace movement underwent a renaissance, becoming increasingly involved with progressive causes such as socialism and feminism, and organising international peace congresses in response to the rising European hostilities. Their high-profile endeavours, though ultimately futile, helped to create the impression

that the war was not inevitable, that Europe could progress toward peace. Several of these new organisations focused specifically on cultural cooperation. They included the French society Concordia (established in 1895), the British International Society of Sculptors, Painters and Gravers (founded 1897), the Italian Societa Internazionale degl' Intellettuali (of 1909), and in 1911 a German group called die Brücke. The Lyceum's endeavour to enhance world peace by facilitating cooperation between women artists, writers and intellectuals therefore contributed to a growing movement towards cultural internationalism.

At this point, I should perhaps explain that my own fascination with Smedley and the Lyceum began while I was researching my doctoral thesis on the British peace movement. I am particularly interested in the relationship between pacifism and modern art in the early twentieth century. The Lyceum's contribution to international understanding through art has attracted little scholarly attention, but I am convinced that it deserves a more prominent place in the history books.

The early twentieth century was an era of startling artistic experiment, as well as political unrest. Smedley's travels across Europe on behalf of the Lyceum gave her unusual access to modernist ideas about art, ideas which fed her vision of art as a vehicle for social change.

- Count Harry Kessler

Her friendship with Count Harry Kessler, the German patron of modern art, encouraged her to forge a connection between modern theories of aesthetic unity, and the politics of international relations. With Kessler, she debated the idea that all the arts are essentially one, associating it with the ideal of international unity. In Kessler's company, remembered Smedley, 'a unified world where mutual understanding and love of beauty reigned, seemed natural and inevitable'.



Artistic cooperation was therefore key to the Lyceum's campaign for better international relations. The different clubs held exhibitions of one another's work, and at one show of British art in Berlin, Smedley arranged for a symbolic display of German books, bound by British binders. In 1906, the Lyceum was instrumental in organising a major exhibition of modern German art in London. The idea was first suggested at a Lyceum dinner, and the club hosted its opening reception. The organisers, who included Smedley, were fully aware of the show's diplomatic importance. The

exhibition catalogue declared it a symbol of Britain's friendship with Germany, and advocated art as 'one of the best guarantees of international amity'. In the decade preceding the First World War, the Lyceum coordinated its members to offer just such a guarantee. As Smedley remarked in her character as the June Princess, 'the different forms of Arts must be the surest links to bind the world together, because Art holds universal understanding'.

Any international organisation runs the risk of empowering one nation at the expense of others. However, Smedley's determination that the various Lyceum clubs should relate to one another as independent equals challenged the imperial model of a hierarchy of clubs, with London at its apex. At the opening of the Berlin clubhouse, she offered instead the model of a circle, a unified shape with no beginning. She insisted that the European clubs should manage their own affairs, declaring that 'the greatest obstacle in the path of the Lyceum towards International Fellowship would have been British domination'. Her antipathy to hierarchy was from the outset explicit, based on her understanding that, in her words, 'the initial Club did *not* occupy a commensurate position to the foreign Lyceums similar to that which the Mother Country holds to the Dominions'.



- *Britannia Welcoming her Daughters*

This child's drawing of 'Britannia Welcoming her Daughters', the winning entry in a competition run by the imperialist women's Victoria League, demonstrates the sort of language and imagery against which Smedley was reacting. The metaphor of the family, particularly of mother and child, was widespread in imperialist rhetoric. Smedley chose instead to talk of sister clubs, which would operate amicably, but with complete autonomy and equality. Thus, when the founding committee of the Florence clubhouse refused to accept English money or management, and the Paris Lyceum

designed its own administrative system, she approved their show of independence. We should therefore take care not to confuse her version of internationalism with the corporate globalism which seems to threaten national democracies today. Rather, she advocated a sophisticated balance between global cooperation, and national diversity. In *The June Princess*, she puts the club at the service of national cultures, describing it as ‘a clearing-house in every country for all that is best in that country’. As one fictional character remarks: ‘we become forgetful of our duties to our country if we don’t think in countries sometimes; and so it’s splendid to get up dinners in honour of other nations and understand their point of view. It widens one.’

The business of setting up the international network was a strenuous yet delicate operation. Smedley’s letters home from Europe convey its excitement and complexity. In Berlin in June 1904, she described a big reception at the Palast Hotel where she worked till midnight promoting the club (it was splendid she exclaimed, except for the fact that there was nothing to eat except chocolates and lemonade). Two eminent women, the Princess de Rohan and Countess de Brazza both honoured her with their company, but then began fighting over who was to organise the club’s publicity. Smedley had to intervene with a tactful compromise. She involved herself in all the clubs’ business negotiations, calculating rent and running costs, memberships and fees. She established good relations with the national press of the various countries, and delegated tasks on all sides. As she confessed in a letter to her family, ‘I leave everyone I see, making lists, going to see people for me and generally being busy’. She loved the glamour and gaiety of foreign club receptions, describing in detail the crush of people, and their elegant outfits. After one successful evening in Berlin, she noted how there had been ‘every sort of evening dress to morning dress, some very smart and some very pretty women, and everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. I think it is nice having all kinds of dress’, she remarked. In Italy in 1908, she exerted herself to attract the country’s ‘strongest and best women’, then watched in admiration as they set about establishing their own clubhouse, completely independent of London. As she observed to her father, ‘the intelligence of these women here is of a *very* high order. It is wonderful to see how the Italian men have suddenly taken their hats off – before their womenkind.’

That sense of feminist triumph draws attention to the intimate connection between Smedley’s internationalism, and her campaign for women’s emancipation. In her mind, the two ideals were entwined as one. Indeed, she suggested with a dash of chauvinism, women are far better equipped than men to achieve world peace. In Germany for instance, the idealism of the women she had met through the Lyceum contrasted painfully with what she called ‘the arrogance and rudeness of a certain section of the male community’, not just in Germany, but all over the world. Two of her novels pursue this theme with particular eloquence. In *On the Fighting Line* (which I discussed

earlier), the heroine Minnie Blunt works for a company called the Imperial Alliance Trust. Minnie's misguided faith in the company's imperialist credentials goes hand in hand with her deluded admiration for masculine chivalry. She idolizes the heroes of empire, yet her discovery that the Imperial Alliance Trust has perpetrated a fraud triggers her disillusionment with men, empire, and the militaristic values they embody. She decides that the conventional distinctions between men and women, as between one nation and another, are quite artificial, mere excuses for waging war.

The second of Smedley's novels exploring the relationship between war and gender is *Justice Walk*, published in 1922, but written 7 years earlier, in the midst of the European conflict. The story centres on Johanna Hervey, a rebellious woman artist who dies alone and in poverty, because society cannot stomach her revolutionary art, and her uncompromising moral principles. She leaves a will that consists not of a legal document, but of a letter condemning her critics. In it, she makes a direct connection between the subordination of women, and the vicious psychology of war. Her letter compares a conventional woman's mind to a sewing box full of sentimental play-things, which seduce men into accepting the treacherous sentimentality of war. The play-things, warns Hervey,

flood the battlefields
They entangle the soldiers [...]
They stifle them with knowledge of the women's gratitude.
They warm the hand that slays the Fellow-men.

She urges women to discard feminine sentiment, and to remodel themselves as peace-makers. They should, she proclaims, sew 'the clothes of the world together with firm and beautiful stitches of love for Humanity'.

In 1909, Smedley resigned as Secretary of the Lyceum Clubs, after six years of intensive campaigning and administration. Her reasons were manifold. In the first place, she had married the artist Maxwell Armfield and felt she could no longer give the club her full attention.

- Here he is in a photograph probably taken by Smedley's cousin.

Then, she had her own ambitions as a writer to pursue, and hoped that the clubs were sufficiently established to manage without her. As she wrote to her mother in 1912: 'the International basis *has* become established now, and I am perfectly confident that I shall not be



missed in the slightest, just as I know that the Club work is no longer in my line'. She had worked phenomenally hard to establish the project. A letter written from Berlin in June 1904 gives a taste of the energy with which she promoted it. 'I have a whole day of engagements', she explained, followed by a reception at the Philharmonie, then at 10pm an appointment with an editor which would last for at least two hours, and a seven o'clock start the next day. 'I have an awful cold and headache today', she complained, 'but if I were dying I feel I should go on – I'm so keen – there's *so much* to be done [...] Excuse all this awful club talk. I dream of nothing else.'

I sense however that the institutional compromises the club demanded had begun to grate on her. Herself provocative, radical, outspoken, revolutionary even, she found it difficult to submit to the rule of respectability which the club demanded. The Lyceum had provided a conventional cover for her reforming ambitions. Now, she felt she could operate outside it. The character of the June Princess surely speaks for her, when she voices ambivalence towards the novel's fictional club. 'I've loved the ideals', she exclaims, 'I've loved the world, and it's been splendid to see the beginnings really grow; but sometimes I feel in prison [...] I don't like responsibility. I'd like to be a private person. Oh! Freedom has always been the carrot.' Smedley's rediscovery of herself as a private person brings my story to a close. Thereafter, she and her husband devoted themselves to the theatre, setting up their own drama company which they took to the English provinces, to London, and across America. Yet although Smedley never again played a public role at the Lyceum, she continued publicly to promote the principles of international cooperation, women's equality, and professional achievement which have made it such a remarkable and enduring organisation. When the Lyceum was founded, those principles inspired women across the world, and one hundred years later, they continue to inspire. Ladies, I would like to offer the International Lyceum Clubs my warmest congratulations on achieving their centenary!

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