

Lord Lexden

Conservative peer and historian

Meticulously researched and written in her familiar fine prose, Antonia Fraser has produced a captivating account of the life of the 19th century campaigner for the rights of married women, Caroline Norton

The Case of the Married Woman

Caroline Norton, A 19th Century Heroine Who Wanted Justice for Women

By **Lady Antonia Fraser**
 Publisher **Weidenfeld & Nicolson**

Thanks to excellent, well-researched books by women politicians and historians, we now know much more about the courage and determination of those who fought for legal and political rights for women over the last 200 years. In her new book, the great Antonia Fraser provides a captivating account of the major contribution made by Caroline Norton (1808-77), like her a prolific author.

Caroline's husband, George, briefly an unimportant Tory MP, wooed her passionately at the age of 17, but subjected her to the most violent abuse after their marriage. She blamed him for the miscarriage which robbed her of one of her four children. She remained magnificently defiant. "I can recollect," she said, "no single instance in which I was subdued by harshness."

Men rushed to comfort this beautiful, witty woman of indomitable character. They included the Whig prime minister, Lord Melbourne.

In 1836, George Norton sued Melbourne for



committing adultery with his wife. He demanded £10,000 in damages for assault upon his property, as a wife was then legally defined. Prosecuting counsel alleged that while Melbourne was with her, "Mrs Norton has been seen lying on the floor, her clothes in a position to expose her person." The only prime minister to be a defendant in such a case (Lloyd George was later to have a narrow escape) Melbourne was acquitted, to everyone's amazement. Caroline always protested that she was never his mistress, and having reviewed the evidence, her brilliant biographer sees no reason to disbelieve her.

Despite the acquittal, Norton refused to let her see her children, all of them under seven. One died as a result

of his neglect. Caroline denounced his inhumanity in passionate pamphlets which swayed public opinion. In 1839, an Infant Custody Bill became law. Never again would mothers be denied access to their young children with complete impunity. "For the first time in English history, a mother had some legal rights over her own children," as Fraser states.

It was the start of a long campaign, waged with tremendous vigour, to release married women completely from legal subjection to their husbands. It was of course intolerable that the copyrights in her voluminous poetry and novels, greatly admired by Queen Victoria, should belong to the

abusive George, who pocketed her substantial royalties and determined what portion of them she should receive. Caroline's incessant pamphleteering helped pave the way for the 1857 Marriage Act, which began the process of conferring property rights on women.

The great Irish artist, Daniel Maclise, put her in the House of Lords. A full-length picture of her can be seen in one of

"Norton refused to let Caroline see her children, all of them under seven"

his frescoes above the Lords chamber. There she stands magnificently

representing the Spirit of Justice, a pair of scales in her hand, with an emancipated slave and a symbolic child among her entourage. The many members who have sat beneath her include her great-great-great-grandson, my friend Richard Norton, Lord Grantley, a Ukip peer until 1999. A rebellious spirit runs in the family.

Age does not weary Antonia Fraser. More than 50 years on from her first biography, an acclaimed life of Mary Queen of Scots, she retains her special empathy with women in history. Caroline Norton is the latest beneficiary of her meticulous research and fine prose. 📖

