

## Percy Grainger the Feminist \*

*Catherine Sarah Kirby*

---

All my life I have dreamed how jolly it would be to have a wife or sweetheart who would dress up in man's clothes & go with her lover or husband to all the resorts usually seen by men alone; for instance to go to such places as I have seen in Port Said. How delicious to share all those silly sights with one one truly loves (provided of course she would be amused to see them. Hedda Gabler seemed interested in hearing of such matters). I think it so odious of men that they want to go to places where they would not want their mates, that they themselves can enjoy such places yet consider them "unworthy" of their wives or sweethearts. Of all the men who have enjoyed taking women's bodily virginity are there so few who wish to take the virginity-of-the-minds of their sweethearts, who wish to break down all mental and moral barriers, who wish to destroy all customs that stand between utter oneness, naturalness & unrestraint?<sup>1</sup>

Thus Percy Grainger wrote to his wife-to-be Ella Ström in his self-proclaimed 'famous letter on "lovers & husbands"'.<sup>2</sup> While to us a little unusual in its mode of expression, and with questionable reference to female 'virginity,' this passage demonstrates a striking awareness of the social inequalities faced by women of the time that may surprise some readers.

---

\* I thank Stewart Manville and Barry Ould of the Percy Grainger Society for granting permission to reproduce previously unpublished letters held in the collection of the Grainger Museum, Melbourne. I also thank the anonymous reviewers for pointing out the many different readings of the opening quote, as well as for their other helpful suggestions throughout the article.

<sup>1</sup> Percy Grainger, letter (holograph) to Ella Ström, 23 Apr. 1927, Reg. no. 01.1004, Grainger Museum, Melbourne (GM). Grainger's distinctive spellings (including contractions of words such as 'your' to 'yr') and use of punctuation (including double round and square brackets, ampersands and missing apostrophes) have been retained throughout. Also retained is his use of underlining for emphasis. Where double underlines are used text also appears in bold type. Grainger's use of square brackets as interchangeable for parentheses has not been retained, to avoid confusion with editorial interpolation. For more information on the idiosyncrasies of Grainger's writing, see 'Editor's Note,' *The Farthest North of Humanness: Letters of Percy Grainger 1901–14*, ed. Kay Dreyfus (South Melbourne, Vic.: Macmillan, 1985), xviii.

<sup>2</sup> Grainger, letter (holograph) to Ström, 23 Apr. 1927, Reg. no. 01.1004, GM.

Grainger was a complex character, considered by many to have created compositions and musical experiments that were ahead of their time. His sometimes challenging opinions are documented in his vast collections of letters, autobiographical and personal philosophical writings; in many cases, his ideas appear incongruous with the prevailing ideas and beliefs of his era. A self-professed 'anti-moralist' and exponent of all things 'democratic,' many of his outspoken ideas on society have been examined in some detail.<sup>3</sup> However, there has, to date, been little research on his views on women. The aim of this article is to explore these views, and give an alternative perspective of a man who has been casually referred to as a 'misogynist' in the literature.<sup>4</sup> While Grainger was not the first to conceive many of the ideas on women and women's rights presented below (some have variously been held by individual women and men since at least the eighteenth century) it is still unusual for one person (and in particular, one man) of that era to hold them all. Through an examination of these opinions found in Grainger's letters and writings on women and gender equality (while also taking into account some of his more dogmatic views on national identity, which were instrumental in the formation of these ideas) this article will ultimately pose the question, was Percy Grainger a proto-feminist?

Grainger often expressed wildly contradictory views across his various writings, and this can make analysing his opinions quite challenging. For example, the views on marriage expressed by a younger Grainger in letters during the several months in which both his then girlfriend Karen Holten and his mother were pressuring him to marry (a situation that he was increasingly desperate to avoid) are quite contrary to the ideas on marriage presented in his letters to Ström later in life. While at first this may seem to undermine the validity of identifying one particular view as his prevailing philosophy, evidently the views of a person in their early twenties on issues such as marriage can change considerably as they age. Still, with close examination, themes and patterns in Grainger's writing that run the course of his entire life begin to emerge. These are often consolidated in the philosophical or reflective writings that he made in later life. These views are by and large liberal and progressive, and, by their constant appearance in his letters over a period of more than forty years, could be said to correspond to his overarching ideal view of society. That being said, in many cases, Grainger's ideas are rarely anything other than abstract. He seldom offers any suggestion for social change, merely asserting a personal ideology, and I am not, therefore, attempting to present him as any sort of revolutionary.

Grainger was an active advocate of women's suffrage. On 14 June 1910, the day that the Women's Suffrage Bill or the 'Conciliation Bill' was introduced into the British House of Commons, Grainger signed a 'memorial' of support sent by a number of leading musicians to the Prime Minister, Herbert Henry Asquith.<sup>5</sup> This bill was a significant event in the campaign for women's suffrage in Britain. The violent 'Black Friday,' a turning point in the public support for the campaign, was a result of the bill being dropped on its second reading. Grainger's

<sup>3</sup> Percy Grainger, 'Call-to-mindments about Delius Piano Concerto,' in *Deemths ((Opinions)) Book 1*, section 8, GM. Re-printed in *Self-Portrait of Percy Grainger*, ed. Malcolm Gillies, David Pear & Mark Carroll (New York: OUP, 2006), 221; Grainger, letter to Karen Holten, 29 Oct. 1906. Re-printed Dreyfus, ed., *Farthest North of Humanness*, 83–84.

<sup>4</sup> To give just one example, Wilfred Mellers, *Percy Grainger* (Oxford/New York: OUP, 1992), 10.

<sup>5</sup> 'The Women's Suffrage Bill—Actors and Actresses' Memorial—The Musicians' Memorial,' *Manchester Guardian*, 17 June 1910, 8.

support of the women's suffrage movement is unsurprising when considered in the broader context of his ideas about equality and personal freedom.

In his younger years, Grainger steadfastly regarded marriage as an objectionable concept, frequently equating it with the enslavement of women and a hindrance to the greater goal of equality. Kay Dreyfus has suggested that his mother's revulsion to marriage and childbirth 'undoubtedly influenced Grainger's feelings.'<sup>6</sup> In his twenties and thirties, he was not interested in getting married himself, and also found no shame (as many others did at the time) in anyone, regardless of gender, having sex before marriage or remaining unmarried:

My own understanding of myself is that I would rather not be bought, sold, used, or owned; just as little as I want to buy, sell, use, or own others. Moreover it must always be remembered in connection with my way of acting that I do not at all regard an old-maids condition to be in the least less good, desirable, or honourable than a married woman's, and therefore I would never regard it as wrong against a woman to have helped her to become an old maid.<sup>7</sup>

Grainger began to struggle with his previous dismissal of marriage after first meeting with Ström. This was evidently the first time in his life he had felt any real desire to marry and this undoubtedly created a sort of cognitive dissonance with his previous outspoken views on the institution. Rather than retract his belief that marriage was a tradition of inequality and slavery, he began to redefine it in terms he found more acceptable. He hoped, through his marriage to Ström, to create 'a background of security upon which a greater freedom than heretofore may be achieved.'<sup>8</sup> He saw marriage as a union of two artists, with no element of possessiveness:

Here we see the quicksands into which possessive habits lead us. Because the man (for so long) has paid for the wife & her offspring he really regards them as his own. What a terrible blasphemy! Everything in nature is free from all except nature's laws. Thus we hear free speech, free verse, free trade, "the land of the free" lauded to the skies. But free love, never! Do these good people really believe that freedom, the one unailing hunger of all animal life, can be right in all domains except love's, & there inapplicable?<sup>9</sup>

Grainger also strongly supported women's financial independence, especially within marriage. At first (during his relationship with Holten in 1907, at around the age of twenty-five) this appears to have stemmed from a frustration at the prospect of male financial responsibility for his wife and offspring:

Good God, when men want to upkeep their children [[of art or science]] they jolly well have to set-to and earn for them, solidly. Why should women expect *their* children kept up by man's work; and by a poor man at that? I must say I think that lack of pride scandalous! Let women if they *must have children*, learn to earn for them. Let women if they *must live with a man*, learn to pay for their part of that life.<sup>10</sup>

Quickly, Grainger found a way to align this with his other views on freedom and choice. By 1908, he suggested in a letter to his mother that financial dependence was also a hindrance

<sup>6</sup> Dreyfus, ed., *Farthest North of Humanness*, xiv.

<sup>7</sup> Grainger, letter to Holten, 21–22 Sep. 1907, in Dreyfus, ed., *Farthest North of Humanness*, 139.

<sup>8</sup> Grainger, letter (holograph) to Ström, 2 Oct. 1927, Reg. no. 01.1009, GM.

<sup>9</sup> Grainger, letter (holograph) to Ström, 23 Apr. 1927, Reg. no. 01.1004, GM.

<sup>10</sup> Grainger, letter to Holten, 21–22 Sep. 1907, in Dreyfus, ed., *Farthest North of Humanness*, 142.

to female equality and a woman's personal freedom:

There is another unjolly admission in marriage. Man takes on the expenses of the woman he marries so that her doings & movements may be amenable to *his* needs. He is the rudder, she the guided vessel. No amount of love on both sides quite idealizes away this unindividualized, ½ enslaved, ½ bag-&-baggage-like servantry of the "wife of man" I don't say I couldn't swallow that, but it's an ugly dose. Each man that does that is in some little or great way stemming the glorious growing flow ... of woman's future equality. (If that is her future—we hope so)<sup>11</sup>

While Grainger's views may seem to be based initially on a thinly veiled concern for his own financial situation, he did develop a genuine wish for women to have the same financial freedom that he did. Ström had little money of her own and did not particularly like the idea of working. Prior to their wedding, to facilitate her desired financial independence, Grainger settled at least £4000 upon her, with the intention of adding several other settlements following their marriage.<sup>12</sup> This seems somewhat contradictory, given that he was still supporting her out of his own pocket. However, he considered these settlements to be gifts, intended to create a situation of independence: the money was under her name and she was free to do with it as she chose, rather than any sort of allowance over which he had control. One has to recognise however that a gift of this nature would have presumably promoted gratitude in Ström (whether this was the intended effect or not) from which she would never be entirely free. Yet Grainger appeared to feel he was offering her an opportunity to be self-reliant without her having to ask permission, stating: 'freedom (of however noble a kind) always brings dangers with it; therefore free natures like yours ... always need a really firm background of support and security—tho such natures are oftenest too brave to seek or demand it.'<sup>13</sup>

Two other aspects of the traditional marriage that Grainger opposed were the wife taking her husband's name and the idea of the wedding ring. He suggested, in a letter of January 1928, that Ström might prefer to keep her own name, or add it to his as either 'Ella Ström Grainger' or a hyphenated version. Always an advocate of individualism, he thought it a shame for women to lose their own names in wedlock and disliked the idea of children being named after their father rather than mother.<sup>14</sup> Ström evidently also felt the weight of the expectations society placed on names, especially in relation to marriage, writing to Grainger that

I always only put Ella V. Ström or Ella Viola Ström without a preface of Miss on my travelling labels—I like it better thus. Women have a dreadful disadvantage to be stamped as either married or unmarried which the men have not, in any case!<sup>15</sup>

On the issue of the wedding ring Grainger believed:

As you must likely know, the wedding ring is a come-down-ness (survival) from the times when wives were bought like chattels & kept tied up (like cattle) by rings put round their wrists or necks or ankles or thru their noses ... I have no wish to parade that he-some-brutalness every hour before every stranger. Therefore I see no worth in the

<sup>11</sup> Grainger, letter to Rose Grainger, 4 Feb. 1908, in Dreyfus, ed., *Farthest North of Humanness*, 182.

<sup>12</sup> Grainger, letter (holograph) to Ström, 2 Oct. 1927, Reg. no. 01.1009, GM.

<sup>13</sup> Grainger, letter (holograph) to Ström, 2 Oct. 1927, Reg. no. 01.1009, GM.

<sup>14</sup> Grainger, letter (holograph) to Ström, 7 Jan. 1928, Reg. no. 01.1012, GM.

<sup>15</sup> Ström, letter (holograph) to Grainger, 10, 11, 12 Feb. 1928, Reg. no. 02.0204, GM.

**Image 1.** Frederick Morse (New York), Percy Grainger and Ella Viola Ström on their wedding day, 9 August 1928. Silver gelatin print. Reproduced with permission, Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne.



ring business. It either means enslavement of woman, or it means nothing. And nothing is further from my ideas of wedlock than the enslavement of woman—as you know. It would be a farce for me to make-believe I had a feeling for a weddingring when my hand is bitterly out against all those old-time underlingnesses of womankind that the ring stands for & reminds us of. Therefore I will not get you a ring of my own will.<sup>16</sup>

The idea of the ring as a relic of ancient slavery was a popular (although difficult to substantiate) belief of the time, and was frequently quoted in newspaper articles across Australia.<sup>17</sup> However, as with so many of Grainger's most vociferous arguments, in the following paragraph he relented to a more moderate position. He was aware of the societal expectations placed on women and their behaviour and understood that, despite his beliefs, to deviate from these expectations could cause Ström social difficulties. Not wanting to impose his views on her, he said that he would buy her a ring if she would like it, or that he would be happy for her to get one for herself if she wished.

It would appear that Ström was also uncomfortable with the conventional definitions of marriage, as applied to her own life. While it could be argued that it would be cruel of Grainger to begrudge a woman who had spent much of her life up to that point as a mistress the public display of 'respectability' that a ring or married name might offer, these things do not seem

<sup>16</sup> Grainger, letter (holograph) to Ström, 29 Mar. 1928, Reg. no. 01.1014, GM.

<sup>17</sup> 'Gossip,' *Sydney Stock and Station Journal*, 20 Dec. 1907, 2; 'Symbols of Slavery: Romance of Famous Rings,' *World's News*, 21 Aug. 1926, 4.

altogether in line with her own views. She wrote to him three months before their wedding:

I believe I am after all better fitted to be a man's mistress than his wife. But I am encouraged to have my try of wifeliness with you, because you are unusual and unconventional enough to take me as I am, knowing my deeds as you do.<sup>18</sup>

Closely tied to Grainger's views on marriage were his views on sexual freedom. Much has been written on these, including his interest in flagellation, undoubtedly due to his candid writings and thorough documentation of his own sexual practices. He was clearly comfortable in his own interests, and he expressed at several points throughout his life a desire for all people (and in particular, women) to practice the same level of sexual self-awareness and openness as he did. He wrote to Holten in 1907 that he wished that young girls could be trained, in the same way society trains young boys, 'from the very start to be as selfish, as dirty-minded, as unnatural, as health-reckless as boys—how both sexes could go to hell in joy & oblivion.'<sup>19</sup> He also showed disdain for the prevailing mores of a woman preserving her 'purity' in order to attract a husband: 'And just think how many women think [it] wise to entice by refraining; who think it to "lose" to "yield". A composer might as well enhance his reputation by not writing, (which is, I own, just what I'm doing).'<sup>20</sup>

In preparation for her marriage to Grainger, Ström felt compelled to travel to Sydney to seek the consent of her lover, Iyemasa Tokugawa, a Japanese diplomat and Consul-General to Australia. Their relationship was long standing, and she had previously travelled from London to Sydney to be with him. Grainger did not believe the fact of being married to another man should hinder Ström continuing this relationship if she wanted it, stating 'I would never wish to see you limit your love-life to the old absurd idea of marriage. Love without utter freedom is as unthinkable to me as marriage without love.'<sup>21</sup> He even went as far as to suggest that they could move, for six months of each year, to whichever city Tokugawa was in to facilitate that relationship if Ström wished to remain lovers once married.<sup>22</sup> However, Grainger's ideas of 'free love' did not generally extend to the male of a partnership. While, theoretically, he desired a society in which men and women were not constrained by rigid gender roles ('I like the man who can sew & the girl who rides like a man'<sup>23</sup>), he felt that there were a number of areas in which the divide between the sexes was too great, and that a wider freedom would need to be allowed to women, in order to create a situation that was balanced. He listed a number of reasons for this:

1. There has been more than enough of male "free love" condoned by sweethearts without the corresponding amount of female "free love".
2. A lover or husband who takes other sweethearts is almost certain to wound his wife's pride, hurt her standing, make life uncomfortable for her, as things are at present.

<sup>18</sup> Ström, letter (holograph) to Grainger, 8 May 1928, Reg. no. 02.0207, GM. Ella Grainger was an artist, poet and progressive thinker in her own right, whose views on this subject and many others deserve more space than this article is able to provide. In analysing her relationship with Percy, it is important not to underrate her capacity for independent thought by suggesting she was entirely passive or incapable of resisting Grainger's influence.

<sup>19</sup> Grainger, letter to Holten, 1 Feb. 1907, in Dreyfus, ed., *Farthest North of Humanness*, 180.

<sup>20</sup> Grainger, letter to Holten, 23 May 1907, in Dreyfus, ed., *Farthest North of Humanness*, 111.

<sup>21</sup> Grainger, letter (holograph) to Ström, 2 Oct. 1927, Reg. no. 01.1009, GM.

<sup>22</sup> Grainger, letter (holograph) to Ström, 20 Mar. 1928, Reg. no. 01.1014, GM.

<sup>23</sup> Grainger, letter to Holten, 18 Nov. 1907, in Dreyfus, ed., *Farthest North of Humanness*, 163.

3. The woman's love life is more vital to her than man's to him.
4. because I feel that the worlds progress calls for a loosening of woman's morals (until they are on a par with men's) before a greater, further loosening of man's morals is encouraged.
5. We can never get far away from our own lives. My own interest in many sweethearts (always only theoretical) is very faint now. What I have been thru (my own mistakes, I mean) was too bitter. I have not the heart to face more. But I can still be enthralled at the thought of a radiant, beloved, unbroken being like yrself spreading her wings in freedom.<sup>24</sup>

Grainger liked the idea of a relationship which allowed for polyamory and this evidently caused tensions between him and Holten. This is especially evident from the letters sent during the period in which she was trying to convince him to marry her, and while he was still quite young and determinedly set against the idea. Even at this early stage, he was acutely aware of the double standard that looked, if not favourably, at least acceptingly, on men having many sexual partners, while condemning and ostracising women for the same behaviour. He also did not understand why women should accept something that was, in his view, detrimental to their freedom and happiness:

Our European culture trains man for polygamy and woman for monandry. Our European polygamy costs man as good as nothing, our women's monandry costs them (the women) the loss of their life-happiness, disappointment. That men are satisfied with the situation is not so surprising, since he wins all the time. But that the European woman upholds a thing that destroys everything for her is beyond my understanding ... I gave you the chance to have my love *plus* polyandry as much as you liked, and I feel you would rather give up *everything* which is not in accordance with our European women's claims rather than accept something which is 10 times richer than these claims. You don't love me as much as bourgeois opinions which you owe to God knows who.<sup>25</sup>

This letter, written in 1912, does display a level of immaturity in its inability to understand the difficulty a woman of that time would have had in rejecting wholesale the surrounding society and its 'bourgeois opinions' for Grainger's impractical ideology. (It also does not consider the possibility that she simply may not have wanted polyandry!) While this letter was clearly written in frustration, Grainger's petulant irritation is at least cloaked in an (albeit flimsy) attempt at an ideological equality.

Grainger also felt that there was, and should be, a definite separation between love and sex, writing to Ström that 'sex & love are not the same thing, tho they can be united in one couple of lovers ... Love is the long need of the soul. Sex is the short, quick need of the body.'<sup>26</sup> He tied this to his views on financial and personal freedom, and in particular the idea of raising, or the ostensible necessity of having, children. Grainger considered the advent of effective contraception to be instrumental in the liberation of women, citing 'faulty precautionary measures' as the reason behind the supposed 'niggardly' and 'boring' attitudes towards faithfulness and promiscuity in women of the day.<sup>27</sup> He wrote to Holten:

<sup>24</sup> Grainger, letter (holograph) to Ström, 23 Apr. 1927, Reg. no. 01.1004, GM.

<sup>25</sup> Grainger, letter to Holten, 18 Jan. 1912, in Dreyfus, ed., *Farthest North of Humanness*, 444.

<sup>26</sup> Grainger, letter (holograph) to Ström, 23 Apr. 1927, Reg. no. 01.1004, GM.

<sup>27</sup> Grainger, letter to Holten, 20 Feb. 1912, in Dreyfus, ed., *Farthest North of Humanness*, 449.

When women all earn their bread just like men, or the state supports all women, or all children, then I believe that women (on the whole) will take their place in the world (free and spontaneous) as they do in Wagner's Operas, and that we will hear less nonsense about "faithfulness" and unselfishness and similar unpleasantness from the women's side. The child should only make the woman more mature and free and self-contained than the reverse—if only it was not for lack of means! Moreover, we live in the century of the "condom", and it is quite meaningless, in our time, to talk of love and sexuality, as if they (accidents excepted) need to have anything to do with child-birth and motherhood ... I have nothing against people being unenterprising, but I don't like it being made into a virtue.<sup>28</sup>

Grainger's ideas of motherhood were again linked to those of sexual freedom. He evidently believed children to be the creation and responsibility of their mother (understandable considering his own upbringing, his close relationship to his mother, and little contact with his own father.) This, he felt, should give women greater freedom, in particular, to choose the father of their children, regardless of marriage ties:

How could such a one as yr last friend pin his hopes of happiness on such an impossible condition as your sex-faithfulness to him? How can a loving husband resent his wife having children by other men, if she wants to? Does not every man realise the importance of free father-choice to the mother-women? She has only one life; can any man be so conceited as to think it **right** of any woman to limit her breed-experimentation to him alone? Music is as serious to me as her offspring to a mother. Of course I am delighted when someone voices a liking for my music. But would I expect that person to say: "I now wish to hear no other music but yrs"? If the person said that I would at once feel my heart sink, rather rating the person as stupid or false.<sup>29</sup>

The comparison between composition and childbearing is not an unusual one for the time, however it does again display a certain immaturity of thought.

Following an article in a newspaper suggesting that women in the United States would be worse off after the Second World War as so many potential husbands had died, Grainger wrote a response titled 'Woman's Unwillingness to Doff Sex-Slavery in Anglo-Saxon Lands' in his book of Deemths. He believed the idea of a woman retaining her 'purity' was simply a tactic to gain security, and compared it to selling herself into slavery:

Purity, of course, is merely a selling virtue, not a buyer's. The "pure woman" is not shopworn, therefore deserves a first hand price. The pure woman cares nothing for her own sexual satisfaction, but only for her husband's. In other words, she is after a meal-ticket rather than a Cleopatra-couch ... So the Anglo-Saxon woman willingly throws away her sex-equality ... towards man for her victory in the class-war.<sup>30</sup>

It is interesting to note many similarities between the arguments presented in the Deemths and those of Germaine Greer in *The Female Eunuch*. She, too, compared marriage to slavery, describing women as 'the most oppressed class of life-contracted unpaid workers, for whom

<sup>28</sup> Grainger, letter to Holten, 20 Feb. 1912, in Dreyfus, ed., *Farthest North of Humanness*, 449.

<sup>29</sup> Grainger, letter (holograph) to Ström, 23 Apr. 1927, Reg. no. 01.1004, GM.

<sup>30</sup> Grainger, 'Woman's Unwillingness to Doff Sex-Slavery in Anglo-Saxon Lands,' in Deemths ((Opinions)) Book II, GM.

**Image 2.** Unknown photographer (Denmark), Karen Holten dressed in Percy Grainger's clothes, 1909. Silver gelatin print. Reproduced with permission, Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne.



slaves is not too melodramatic a description.<sup>31</sup> She also derides the notion of women who willingly enter into this 'slavery' for personal security, stating, 'if a woman gets married because she is sick of working, she asks for everything she gets.'<sup>32</sup>

Grainger also felt that the slavery of women was apparent in traditional and restrictive ways of dress.<sup>33</sup> Grainger believed the freedom afforded by a short skirt to be more liberating. He wrote to Holten in 1907: 'Why should you *always* wear short skirts? because long ones are dirty & pick up all the spit and muck of the streets, because they (the long ones) make it harder to run or jump or move actively, & are the mark of the female sex's slavery.'<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1970), 329.

<sup>32</sup> Greer, *Female Eunuch*, 320. The similarities between Grainger's ideas and Greer's work even extend as far as their similar deconstruction of the same texts. Greer's chapter 'Womanpower' in *The Female Eunuch* challenges Otto Weininger's 1903 *Sex and Character* (widely considered one of the more misogynistic books of fin-de-siècle literature) by turning the things he defines as 'defects' in women into advantages 'by rejecting Weininger's concepts of virtue and intelligence.' (Greer, *The Female Eunuch*, 16.) Some 64 years earlier, Grainger written to Karen Holten of his interest in *Sex and Character*. He found several 'fundamental points' on which he disagreed with Weininger, saying that: 'he & I are the poles. Nevertheless I see a huge lot in his work that falls in with my own thoughts ... most of the things he says as counting against woman, are, (to my so very different mind) wholly & strongly in her favor.' (Grainger, letter to Holten, 29 Oct. 1906, in Dreyfus, ed., *Farthest North of Humanness*, 84.)

<sup>33</sup> This again reflects the ideas of many of the feminists of the 1960s and 1970s (notably including Greer and Gloria Steinem).

<sup>34</sup> Grainger, letter to Holten, 13 Mar. 1907, in Dreyfus, ed., *Farthest North of Humanness*, 99.

One of the more problematic elements of many of Grainger's arguments (across all his views, not just those on women) is his constant linking of positive societal attributes to a perceived supremacy of Scandinavian culture:

They dash into divorce just as their forebears dashed into a haunted barrow. No doubt they are afraid, but they are more inquisitive than afraid. I love women to hold a free place in the world, to walk a free path in all ways unquestioned. "Votes for women", easy divorce, Selma Lagerlöf and Ellen Keys come painlessly and effortlessly to races whose womankind from the very dimmest past onwards has always been a free sex and an obstreperous sex.<sup>35</sup>

This raises the not insignificant, but somewhat circular argument, of whether Grainger's views stem primarily from his vision of a universal human freedom, of which he feels Scandinavia is a positive example, or whether his views are a result of his passionate belief in the superiority of Scandinavia, and that he has hence taken on what he believed to be their values as his own. There has been much written on Grainger's views on national identity.<sup>36</sup> Overall, he tended to believe the best aspects of the people he knew were all in some way Nordic (even if the people themselves were not of Scandinavian extraction).

Grainger's Australian identity was also linked with his love of Scandinavia. He often compared what he viewed to be the strongest characteristics of Australian culture to Scandinavian traditions and customs. Malcolm Gillies, in his article on Grainger and Australian identity in the 1930s, shows the way in which both the Australian man and woman, in Grainger's view, embodied the gender equality and resourcefulness found (out of necessity) in Scandinavians, through comparable struggles with climate and distance, stating 'this cross-gender resourcefulness arose from another Nordic characteristic: love of democracy.'<sup>37</sup> Peculiarly, Grainger described Australia as a Nordic country, and it was the same aspects that he approved of in Scandinavian culture, reflected in his Australian upbringing, that he often used to justify his perspective on many things, including marriage. He wrote to Holten in 1906:

Remember I come from a new country where the freedom & independence idea is the biggest virtue, & that further as a socialist & democrat the idea of anyone belonging to anyone is a perfect nightmare (whatever the folk in question may be feeling, one way or another) to me.<sup>38</sup>

Grainger's piece 'Woman's Unwillingness to Doff Sex-Slavery in Anglo-Saxon Lands,' mentioned above, further illustrates the ways in which his views on nationalism informed those on equality and women's rights. He believed that the prevailing traits of the women

---

<sup>35</sup> Percy Grainger, letter to D.C. Parker, 28 Aug. 1916. Re-printed in *The All Round Man: Selected Letters of Percy Grainger 1914–1961*, ed. Malcolm Gillies and David Pear (New York: OUP, 1994), 28.

<sup>36</sup> For a few examples, see, Roger Covell, 'An Australian Composer?', in *The New Percy Grainger Companion*, ed. Penelope Thwaites (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2010), 140–49; Kay Dreyfus, 'Percy Grainger and Australia: Was there a Kookaburra in those English "Country Gardens"?' *Meanjin Quarterly* 41. 2 (1982): 155–70; and Malcolm Gillies, 'Percy Grainger and Australian Identity: The 1930s,' in *One Hand on the Manuscript: Music in Australian Cultural History 1930–1960*, ed. Nicholas Brown, et al. (Canberra: Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University, 1995), 34–44.

<sup>37</sup> Gillies, 'Percy Grainger and Australian Identity,' 36–37.

<sup>38</sup> Grainger, letter to Holten, 29 Oct. 1906, in Dreyfus, ed., *Farthest North of Humanness*, 83.

in the societies he thought to be most 'free' to be preferable to those apparently exhibited by women in 'less favoured nations':

Woman's lesserness (as compared with man) is no different to the lesserness of the less favoured nations—the Jews and Italians, for example. A badly treated sex, or a badly treated nation, has less spleen, less pride, less demands, less moods. The badly treated ones (whether nation or sex) turn themselves into the "pleasing" channels (Italian music like "Donna e Mobile") and are always smiling. A taciturn old rock like Ibsen denotes centuries of very privileged living. But since real goodness and real happiness (not merely morality and smilingness and "tact") are the goals of mankind, we who love mankind want to see woman drop her daintiness, her gaiety, her smallness, her purity, her morality and swim forth into the waters of reality—with real goodness, bigness (of body-size), selfishness, freedom and sulky unpleasantness. ... In the lands where woman is freest (Scandinavia & Polynesia) woman is big (in body size) and lustful. Also she is a worker in those countries.

Grainger was frequently critical, in his letters to Ström, of women who became, as he believed, unattractive and fat in middle age. These critiques may seem inappropriate, infuriating even, and one may ask, what right did he, a relatively privileged man, have to dole out this kind of criticism to the gender as a whole? This was a question he had considered himself, as he wrote to Ström in 1927:

You must remember this, when I criticise woman, accuse her of losing her beauty thru laziness, I am not the normal man criticizing the normal woman. I have myself given up or never began most of these things that are the downfall of man, bodily & morally; smoking, drinking, meateating, flirting, running the risk of sexual diseases, overcoats, hats, careless & inconsiderate attitudes towards women in erotics, expensive living & luxuries. ... I feel I have placed myself on neutral ground, from which my criticisms of woman should not be as much resented as the criticism of a normal man—because my own life proves conclusively how much more I criticize normal male life & habits. I feel that my observations ... ought to be taken for what they are worth, without favorable or unfavorable prejudice.<sup>39</sup>

Of course, one could question whether this constitutes an appropriate platform to engage in such criticisms, but it can at least be said that he was aware of the criticism that could be raised against him. There is also the question of whether any positive views Grainger held on women's rights and equality are undermined by his sadomasochism and the violent sexual fantasies described in his letters (including at least one occasion on which he writes of a rape fantasy, albeit one he asks for consent to enact).<sup>40</sup> It must be noted, however, that there is no evidence that he ever engaged in anything that was not consensual, even suggesting to Ström that he would not practise flagellation except at her explicit invitation, never asking for it himself. There has been much debate over whether one can engage in or approve of sadomasochistic practices and remain a feminist. This came to a head during the 'sex wars' of the late 1970s, in which radical feminists who condemned sadomasochism, pornography, and other practices

<sup>39</sup> Grainger, letter (holograph) to Ström, 21 Mar. 1927, Reg. no. 01.1003, GM.

<sup>40</sup> Grainger, letter to Holten, 9 Mar. 1908, in Dreyfus, ed., *Farthest North of Humanness*, 198.

which they believed to perpetuate male dominance clashed with libertarian feminists who were in support of any consensual sexual activity, including sadomasochism, which brought pleasure to the participants.<sup>41</sup>

The intention of this article was not to present Grainger as a revolutionary, a pioneer, or even an activist on any sustained level, as few of the ideas presented above were unique to him alone. However, the progressive views he held on women and equality, which may be surprising to some, fit very much within his own outspoken constructions of the democratic idealist, lover of freedom and his own Australian identity. Due to the frequently contradictory nature of Grainger's writing, it is of course possible to select other quotes from Grainger (be they written as a frustrated young man, or a grumpy old one) that would refute many of these arguments. However, over the span of his life, Grainger consistently displays a real desire for equality between the sexes in every aspect of life. He does not offer a social solution to the problems he recognises, however, I believe there is enough evidence to proclaim Grainger a proto-feminist. While some of Grainger's views may be unconventionally expressed, they also represent an unexpected mirror to many of the objectives of the wider ongoing feminist movement.

---

<sup>41</sup> Ann Ferguson, 'Sex War: The Debate between Radical and Libertarian Feminists,' *Signs* 10.1 (1984): 107. It is interesting that Grainger, who espoused many of the feminist ideals presented in the 1960s and 1970s, should almost physically embody the two opposing sides of the argument that possibly brought an end to the second wave feminist movement.