

Michael Whitfield. *Susanna Morgan: campaigning for reform in early 19th century Bristol*. ALHA Books No 34, Avon Local History & Archaeology, 2022. 41 pp, numerous b/w ill. and centrefold map. Paperback £3.50. [ISBN 978-1-911592-34-1].

Bristol-born Susanna Morgan (1772-1856) was a philanthropist and campaigner in a number of causes, including the relief of poverty, education for poor children, and prison design. In 1812 she published an anonymous pamphlet proposing the establishment of a bank for poor workers, which formed the basis for the Prudent Man's Friend Society founded two years later. The PMFS offered qualifying members of the "labouring classes" saving facilities, as well as interest-free loans. Morgan served as Secretary to the society for many years. In 1832 she moved to Staffordshire, where she was involved in similar schemes.

Again anonymously, in 1815 she published proposals for improvements to Bristol Gaol, which she visited in the course of her research. In 1819 she published a third anonymous pamphlet arguing for the establishment of a fever hospital for Bristol. All these works were backed by careful research. She was also involved in the governing bodies of two infant schools, and the development of a third in the city. In addition, in 1832 she returned to Bristol to help during a cholera epidemic.

When Susanna Morgan died in Staffordshire at the age of eighty-four her activities were remembered in a glowing obituary in the *Bristol Mercury*, which was republished in the *Staffordshire Advertiser*. "It has seldom fallen to our lot to record the departure of one more eminently deserving of respectful remembrance," wrote the obituarist.¹

In spite of the writer's optimism, Susanna Morgan has been largely forgotten. It is in order to retrieve the story of her life and work, and also to explain why this might be so, that Michael Whitfield has written this short biography.

Whitfield cites the example of historian John Latimer, who in 1887 attributed the formation of the PMFS to the philanthropist Richard Reynolds and other men and points out that "Latimer... makes no mention of the person who proposed the society and who was on the original board. That was Susanna Morgan". He could have cited further examples: Martin Gorsky's 1999 *Patterns of Philanthropy: Charity and Society in Nineteenth-century Bristol* lists the PMFS's male officers (p. 168), but makes no mention of Morgan or the other eleven women who served on the committee. Even Morgan's contemporaries were apt to leave the women out: the *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette* (2 December 1813) reports that "Dr Randolph is the chief promoter" of the PMFS.

But why were women omitted? Whitfield remarks that "Women, at this time, generally had a low profile and few were noted for their political or social activity" (p. 2). Later, he suggests that Morgan herself at times sought anonymity. He then cites Madge Dresser's study of how the establishment of male networks such as the Society of Merchant Venturers, the Bristol Commercial Rooms and the Bristol Chamber of Commerce excluded businesswomen. Morgan was not, so far as we know, a businesswoman, but many of the men associated with philanthropic projects in Bristol were. Richard Reynolds was an ironmaster, and Thomas Daniel was involved in the slave trade; both were vice-presidents of the PMFS.

Yet Morgan did not always avoid publicity. Her name, and that of other women associated with the PMFS, regularly appeared in newspaper reports of annual meetings, and as the 1856 *Bristol Mercury* obituary suggests, her involvement in the PMFS and her authorship of the anonymous pamphlets were by that time at least no secret.

¹ 'Death of Mrs Susanna Morgan', *Staffordshire Advertiser*, 16 February 1856, reprinted from the *Bristol Mercury*.

Nevertheless, much about her remains obscure. The source for the reference to her return to Bristol during the cholera epidemic seems to be the obituary which says she organised “prompt and active measures for the abatement” of the disease, but what this actually involved is unclear. Whitfield characterises her as an educated woman, but how she gained that education is unknown. She was a wealthy woman, but the source of her wealth is not explained. When she became a Unitarian in 1801, Whitfield notes that according to her obituary this “endangered her worldly prospects”, but how or why this was so is not explored, and there is no hint that she remained other than a wealthy woman.

It may be that the information is simply not available in the surviving records. Yet in spite of the gaps, Whitfield’s account of Susanna Morgan is detailed enough to give a comprehensive picture of her life and work. It also provides useful background to the projects in which Morgan was involved, for example the economic and social conditions of the period, the state of Bristol’s gaol, and the background to the fever epidemics of 1817-1820. In addition, it gives a sense of the circles in which she moved: the doctors and dissenters, manufacturers and clergymen, Quakers, Unitarians, feminists, businessmen (and slave traders).

All in all, this short biography makes a strong case for why Morgan should be remembered at least as well as the men she worked with, many of whom have made their way into the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (e.g. Thomas Daniel, Francis Randolph and Richard Reynolds. So too did Mary Hays, though not for her association with the PMFS.) At only forty pages, Whitfield’s book is a good introduction to Susanna Morgan’s life and work.

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