

# Vegetarians, Vivisection and Violationism: Gender and the Non-Human Animal in Anna Kingsford's Life and Writing

Ruby Ekkel

The Australian National University

---

## Abstract

Anna Kingsford (1846–1888) was an influential figure within the Victorian vegetarian movement who argued that abstinence from meat laid the foundation for all physical, social, moral and spiritual progress. Like many other vegetarian women of the later nineteenth century, she also actively opposed the practice of vivisection—operating on live animals for scientific or medical purposes—and was deeply engaged in the ‘woman question’ of her period. This article addresses Kingsford’s ideas about non-human animals and gender and examines the complex relationships between them. It argues that Kingsford’s vegetarianism lay at the centre of her world view and profoundly shaped her engagement with antivivisectionism and feminism. Through an investigation of her intertwined commitments to animal and women’s causes, Kingsford’s multifaceted and deeply considered conceptualisation of animals is reconstructed: one which was founded on scientific research, spiritual beliefs and personal experience. This conceptualisation closely interacted with, but was not merely an extension of, her ideas about femininity, gender and women’s emancipation. In foregrounding Kingsford’s vegetarianism, a movement frequently overlooked in existing scholarship on Victorian reformism and politics, this article challenges accounts that subsume the nuanced ideas of vegetarians and other animal protectionists within purportedly more significant causes.

★ ★ ★

I always speak with the greatest delight and satisfaction in the presence of my friends the members of the Vegetarian Society. With them I am quite at my ease, I have no reservation, I have no dissatisfaction. This is not the case when I speak for my friends the Anti-Vivisectionists, the Anti-Vaccinationists, the Spiritualists, or the advocates of freedom for women. I always feel that such of these as are not abstainers from flesh-food have unstable ground under their feet, and it is my great regret that, when helping them in their good works, I cannot openly and publicly maintain what I so ardently believe—that the Vegetarian movement is the bottom and basis of all other movements towards Purity, Freedom, Justice, and Happiness.<sup>1</sup>

Anna Kingsford (1846–1888) was an active antivivisectionist, women’s emancipationist, author, mystic, one of the first British women to qualify as a doctor and a passionate vegetarian. Kingsford’s refusal to eat animals, as the above address to the Vegetarian Society makes clear, was not a quirky addendum to her list of accomplishments, but the foundation of her philosophy, activism and lived experience. Although she is well known for her ferocious opposition to vivisection—the scientific practice of experimenting on live animals—and, to a lesser extent, for her vocal feminism, she felt far more aligned with vegetarians than with antivivisectionists and women’s emancipationists, whose concern for the vulnerable largely did not extend to those killed and consumed as meat.

Despite her significant influence on the animal protectionist movement and the extensiveness of her published writings, dedicated histories of Kingsford’s life and ideas are scarce. Her closest collaborator, Edward Maitland, published a self-aggrandising posthumous biography in 1913, featuring extended extracts from her diaries and letters, which were subsequently destroyed. Maitland’s magnanimous and controversial biography remained the only comprehensive account of Kingsford’s life until Alan Pert’s idiosyncratic, New Age-style biography, *Red Cactus*, was published in 2006.<sup>2</sup> Where her life and thinking have been studied at a scholarly level, Kingsford’s causes are typically addressed in isolation or, at least, in isolation from the vegetarianism she held so dearly. In a recent article, philosopher Mitch Goldsmith addresses Kingsford’s

---

1 Anna Kingsford, ‘Address to the Vegetarian Society of London (1870)’, in *Addresses and Essays on Vegetarianism*, ed. Samuel Hopgood Hart (London: J.M. Watkins, 1912), 145.

2 Edward Maitland, *Anna Kingsford: Her Life, Letters, Diary and Work*, 2 vols. (London: John. M. Watkins, 1896); Alan Pert, *Red Cactus: The Life of Anna Kingsford* (New South Wales: Books and Writers, 2006).

view of animal experimentation as ‘malevolent sorcery’ and considers its implications for modern debates in animal ethics.<sup>3</sup> Alison Butler makes a similar argument, presenting Kingsford’s antivivisectionism as an attempt to reconcile modern science with religion in its purest forms.<sup>4</sup> In Christine Ferguson’s compelling denouncement of Kingsford and other women’s omission from studies of the intersections of Victorian science and spiritualism, vegetarianism is also notably absent.<sup>5</sup> Here, as elsewhere, Kingsford’s antivivisectionism dominates historical analysis to the near erasure of her vegetarianism, despite its explicit centrality to Kingsford’s scientific, spiritualist and antivivisectionist beliefs.

This article seeks to take Kingsford’s vegetarianism seriously, analysing how her conceptualisation of non-human animals closely interacted with, but was not merely an extension of, her ideas about femininity, gender and women’s emancipation. In wider histories of Victorian vegetarianism and the better-trod territory of antivivisectionism, Kingsford is often presented as an eccentric exception to more general trends, or, more crudely, as a comically strange ‘crank’. In his article on the ‘animal limits’ of Victorian environmental thought, Jed Mayer references Kingsford as a multifaceted exception—‘vegetarian, anti-vivisectionist, medical reformer, feminist, and mystic’—to the rule of singlemindedness that he argues was responsible for the fractious relationship between nineteenth-century animal rights and environmentalist movements.<sup>6</sup> Contrastingly, and inaccurately, Coral Lansbury depicts Kingsford as a narrowly animal-focused reformer, in contrast to other humanitarians for whom animal protection was one of a suite of interconnected causes.<sup>7</sup> Richard French’s study of antivivisection and medicine in Victorian Britain describes Kingsford as a ‘bizarre’ exemplification of antivivisectionists’

3 Mitch Goldsmith, ‘The unfinished business of Anna Kingsford – Towards an enchanted animal ethic’, *TRACE ∴ Journal for Human-Animal Studies* 7 (2021): doi.org/10.23984/fjhas.99270.

4 Alison Butler, ‘Anna Kingsford: Scientist and sorceress’, in *Repositioning Victorian Sciences: Shifting Centres in Nineteenth-Century Scientific Thinking*, ed. David Clifford, Elisabeth Wadge, Alex Warwick, and Martin Willis (London: Anthem Press, 2006), 59–70.

5 Christine Ferguson, ‘Anna Kingsford and the intuitive science of occultism’, *Aries* 22, no. 1 (2021): 114–35.

6 Jed Mayer, ‘Edward Carpenter, Henry Salt, and the animal limits of Victorian environments’, in *Victorian Writers and the Environment*, ed. Laurence W. Mazzeno and Ronald D. Morrison (London: Routledge, 2016), 222.

7 Coral Lansbury, *The Old Brown Dog: Women, Workers and Vivisection in Edwardian England* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 83.

alleged psychological disturbance, and attributes the intensity of her activism to a frenzied attempt to achieve emotional catharsis in an unsettled moral and intellectual landscape.<sup>8</sup>

Kingsford's treatment reflects a historiographical tendency to dismiss vegetarians as kooks or generally unhinged individuals who occupied the 'edge of madness'.<sup>9</sup> In this frame of reference, vegetarianism is treated as faddish and vaguely comical, or so odd as to make serious analysis of its adherents' countercultural views and practices unnecessary. James Turner, for example, reduces Henry Salt's vegetarianism to a 'passion for vegetables', and details Joseph Ritson's later-life decline into 'lunacy' as an implicit criticism of his influential vegetarian tract.<sup>10</sup> Such accounts can also treat the movement as an expression of social forces almost completely disconnected from animals themselves. Turner argues that Victorian-era animal advocacy was mainly a displacement of class guilt by middle-class and aristocratic Britons unwilling to extend the compassion to fellow humans in the lower classes.<sup>11</sup> As Brian Harrison has argued, such historical interpretations risk overlooking 'more obvious' motivations for humanitarian conduct towards animals, namely a genuine concern for the increasingly visible and increasing suffering through intensified consumption of animals in this period.<sup>12</sup> They also risk uncritically reproducing mainstream Victorian assumptions about vegetarians' madness or political irrelevance.

Vegetarian women in particular have been subject to trivialisation and pathologisation by contemporaries and historians. Brian Luke has highlighted the ways in which women's resistance to animal exploitation, often dubbed 'hysteria' or 'sentiment', is frequently interpreted as a 'biosexual phenomenon to be ignored or subdued' rather than a substantive moral or political challenge.<sup>13</sup> Recent work in the field of animal studies has further underlined how characterisations of animal protection as feminine and 'crazy' redirect attention away from broader societal issues

---

8 Richard French, *Antivivisection and Medical Science in Victorian Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 390–91.

9 James Turner, *Reckoning with the Beast: Animals, Pain, and Humanity in the Victorian Mind* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1980), 19.

10 Turner, *Reckoning with the Beast*, 136, 18.

11 Turner, *Reckoning with the Beast*, 19.

12 Brian Harrison, 'Campaigners against cruelty', *Times Literary Supplement*, 29 January 1982.

13 Brian Luke, 'Taming ourselves or going feral? Toward a nonpatriarchal metaethic of animal liberation', in *Animals and Women: Feminist Theoretical Explorations*, ed. Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 239.

surrounding animal abuse.<sup>14</sup> Ecofeminist scholarship and the developing ‘animal turn’ have fed a growing interest in the historical and intellectual relationship between animal protectionism and feminism. Despite this, pioneering ecofeminist scholar Carol Adams has identified a persistent tendency to ‘explain away’ rather than ‘explain’ women’s vegetarianism and animal advocacy, as well as a propensity for treating it as a secondary appendage to, or an interesting lens into, more important human-focused concerns like suffrage or abolitionism.<sup>15</sup> James Gregory has also pointed out the need for a closer study of the connections between vegetarianism and femininity in a specifically British context.<sup>16</sup>

Noting these absences and possibilities, this article analyses Kingsford’s vegetarianism as a belief system and way of life by investigating concepts of gender and the non-human animal in her life and writing. Kingsford’s vegetarianism is analysed in relationship to the causes of antivivisection and feminism, without being reduced to a lens through which to view other, purportedly more valid, human-centric ideas. Drawing primarily on Maitland’s biography, Kingsford’s own extensive writings, the work of her animal protectionist contemporaries and newspaper reports, this article argues that Kingsford’s concepts of the non-human animal and gender were tightly interrelated in ways previously unappreciated. However, she drew no simple parallels between the oppression of women and non-human animals; rather, she saw women, with their allegedly natural caring qualities, as holding a special responsibility to act as vulnerable animals’ caretakers and protectors. By focusing on her understanding of animals and women as a vegetarian, we avoid an approach to Kingsford and other animal advocates that reads animal protectionism primarily as an insight into other causes or anxieties.

---

14 Lori Gruen and Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, ed., *Animaladies: Gender, Animals, and Madness* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 2.

15 Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*, 20th anniversary edition (New York: Continuum, 2010), 138. See, for example, the attribution of Elizabeth Blackwell’s antivivisectionism to childhood trauma in N. Roth, ‘The personalities of two pioneer medical women: Elizabeth Blackwell and Elizabeth Garrett Anderson’, *Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine* 47, no. 1 (1971): 67–79.

16 James Gregory, *Of Victorians and Vegetarians: The Vegetarian Movement in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 161.

## Vegetarianism

As a vegetarian, Anna Kingsford formed part of the growing animal protection movement in later nineteenth-century Britain. Although concern about cruelty towards animals was not a new phenomenon, a protectionist attitude gained considerable ground and publicity from the 1820s, driven by a range of influences including increased contact with suffering animals in cities, attempts to suppress undesirable behaviour amongst the lower classes and urban removal from livestock farming. The shift in attitude, which found its lasting expression in the emergence of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA), was so pronounced that care for animals came to be seen as a peculiarly English trait.<sup>17</sup>

Vegetarianism was arguably the most subversive element of this movement for animal protection, extending the principles of the humane establishment to animals typically consumed for meat and clothing. The vegetarian movement, also known at the time as the 'Pythagoreanism', attracted a growing number of people who chose to eschew meat for moral, social, religious and health reasons. It could be, as Rebecca Nesvet asserts, simultaneously a practice, ethos, source of identity and political affiliation for its adherents.<sup>18</sup> Diverse concerns about adulteration of meat products, food scarcity and children's health intermingled and occasionally clashed with discourses of animal rights and spiritual fulfilment. The Vegetarian Society, founded in Manchester in 1847, grew rapidly in its first 10 years, while the number of vegetarian newspapers, tearooms and restaurants multiplied to cater to non-meat-eaters' requirements and interests.<sup>19</sup> The society claimed to distribute 5,000 copies of one of its associated journals, the *Vegetarian Messenger*, each month.<sup>20</sup> Although men such as Henry Salt, George Bernard Shaw and Edward Carpenter are most famously associated with Victorian vegetarianism, women were a significant presence within the movement, including writers such as

---

17 Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 129; Brian Harrison, *Peaceable Kingdom: Stability and Change in Modern Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 103.

18 Rebecca Nesvet, 'Vegetarianism', in *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Victorian Women's Writing*, ed. Lesa Scholl and Emily Morris (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 1.

19 Hilda Kean, *Animal Rights: Political and Social Change in Britain Since 1800* (London: Reaktion Books, 1998), 123–24.

20 Liam Young, 'Newman's conversion: Francis William Newman and vegetarianism on the instalment plan', *Victorian Periodicals Review* 52, no. 1 (2019): 176.

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, Martha Brotherton and Beatrice Webb. These authors, like Kingsford, promoted vegetarianism as an avenue towards radical social change.<sup>21</sup>

Part of the reason that vegetarians have received little attention from historians is that they were relatively small in number and often associated with other 'fringe' or 'radical' groups. In his history of vegetarianism, Colin Spencer theorises that meat abstention can be interpreted as an unsettling challenge to societal foundations, thus provoking suspicion or ridicule.<sup>22</sup> It is true that many leading vegetarian figures, such as Kingsford, Henry Salt and Edward Carpenter, saw the rejection of violence towards animals as a foundational element of a much larger societal transformation. This meat-free utopianism, often associated with spiritualism and Theosophy, set many vegetarians apart from their meat-eating peers in the animal protection movement.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, an association with vegetarianism, both in contemporary sources and in more recent histories of the animal rights movement, is liable to be seen as evidence of a group's frivolousness, unacceptable radicalism or decline.<sup>24</sup> For example, H. M. Hyndman, the leader of the Social Democratic Federation, criticised his colleague for associating with the radical vegetarian Edward Carpenter, telling him, 'I do not want the movement [for scientific socialism] to be a depository of old cranks, humanitarians, vegetarians, anti-vivisectionists, arty-crafties and all the rest'.<sup>25</sup> Despite these reservations, vegetarians like Kingsford often worked in uneasy alliance with antivivisectionists and other animal welfare campaigners.

Influenced by her older brother, Kingsford became a vegetarian at a young age. She enjoyed hunting as a young woman but gave up the pastime after imagining the experience from the hunted animal's perspective.<sup>26</sup> In 1874, Kingsford commenced studies at the *Ecole de médecine* in Paris, with the purpose of furthering her fourfold goals: 'purity of diet [vegetarianism],

21 Nesvet, 'Vegetarianism', 1.

22 Colin Spencer, *The Heretic's Feast: A History of Vegetarianism* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1995), 293.

23 Elsa Richardson, 'Man is not a meat-eating animal: Vegetarians and evolution in late-Victorian Britain', *Victorian Review* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 119.

24 Ritvo attempted to convey the decline of antivivisection in the twentieth century by explaining that it appealed only to 'an assortment of feminist, labour activists, vegetarians, spiritualists, and others who did not fit easily into the established order of society'. Ritvo, *Animal Estate*, 162.

25 Quoted in Sheila Rowbotham, "'Commanding the heart": Edward Carpenter and friends', in *Victorian Values*, ed. Gordon Marsden (New York: Longman Publishing, 2014), 252.

26 Samuel Hopgood Hart, 'Biographical preface', in *Addresses and Essays*, 2.

compassion for the animals, the exaltation of womanhood, and mental and moral unfoldment through the purification of the organism'.<sup>27</sup> After graduating the following year, her thesis, *The Perfect Way in Diet*,<sup>28</sup> was published in French, German and English and garnered recognition in the vegetarian movement in Britain and abroad. The book outlines some of the social, political, moral and spiritual beliefs about animals and humanity that underpinned Kingsford's commitment to vegetarianism.

Kingsford based much of her vegetarian advocacy on scientific considerations, arguing that better treatment of animals would lead to the betterment of humans both medically and societally. The first chapter of *The Perfect Way in Diet* draws on biological research to argue that human anatomy has more in common with herbivorous and frugivorous animals than with carnivores. Kingsford analysed the shape and function of animal and human digestive tracts, brains, teeth and facial structures, concluding that 'mankind are naturally frugivorous'.<sup>29</sup> In her speeches, she used more emotive justifications for humanity's 'natural' vegetarianism, characterising humans as fundamentally compassionate, gentle beings with an inherent aversion to bloodshed. If 'man' were indeed suited to carnivorism, she argued, he would surely share 'the savage disposition of the carnivora; it would be a pleasure to him to kill and tear his victim, and the sight of blood would be an agreeable titillation to his hunger'.<sup>30</sup>

Tied to the idea that humans were not adapted to eat meat was Kingsford's belief that vegetarian foods were health-promoting. She endorsed fruits, vegetables and legumes as 'the best and purest forms of human alimentation', while meats were cast as the purveyors of disease and physical degradation. She attributed her own continued vitality, despite multiple chronic health conditions, to the 'simple, pure and unexciting diet which for a period of 10 years I have uninterruptedly maintained'. Kingsford ignored doctors' orders to eat raw meat, even when warned of imminent death if she refused.<sup>31</sup> Even in non-vegetarian publications, she prescribed meat abstinence for conditions including obesity, leanness, skin inflammation and tooth decay.<sup>32</sup>

---

27 Maitland, *Anna Kingsford*, vol. 1, 20.

28 Anna Bonus Kingsford, *The Perfect Way in Diet. A Treatise Advocating a Return to the Natural and Ancient Food of our Race* (London: K. Paul, French, Trübner & Co., 1881).

29 Maitland, *Anna Kingsford*, vol. 1, 16.

30 Anna Kingsford, 'Some aspects of vegetarianism', in *Addresses and Essays*, 130–31.

31 Anna Kingsford, 'A lecture on food', in *Addresses and Essays*, 87.

32 Anna Kingsford, *Health, Beauty and the Toilet: Letters to Ladies from a Lady Doctor* (London: F. Warne, 1886), 11, 24, 101, 196.



Kingsford paired scientific argumentation and personal testimony with disturbing descriptions of the reality of meat-eating to drive home her argument that humans do not naturally 'subsist upon carnage'.<sup>33</sup> She repeatedly critiqued the practice of butchering, cooking and renaming meat products so that the animal's dead body was erased, seeing these practices as evidence of humankind's innate vegetarianism. According to Carol Adams, the function of the absent referent in meat eating is to make absent the individual, once living animal that has been killed in the production of a butchered, cooked, renamed piece of meat.<sup>34</sup> Kingsford describes this phenomenon explicitly, identifying 'the veil ... between the fashionable dining-room and the slaughter-house', which hid the unpalatable truth from polite, meat-eating society:<sup>35</sup>

How I should like to compel all flesh-eating men and women to kill their own meat! Conceive the delicate lady of the period going out, knife in hand, to slaughter her victims for the next day's dinner! Imagine the clergyman, whose mission it is to preach mercy and benevolence, taking his pole-axe from the shelf and sallying forth to his cattle-shed intent on taking innocent life! What a vulgar picture!<sup>36</sup>

Beyond physical ailments, Kingsford charged meat-eating with causing serious moral and social degradation in both producers and consumers. She wrote extensively about the detrimental effects of butchery on butchers, arguing that civilised society should not permit the existence of a trade so 'disgusting, brutalising, and unwholesome'. She worried that in executing 'wholesale massacres' on a daily basis, meat workers were 'deprived of all chance of becoming themselves civilised', and lambasted polite society for profiting from butchers while disdaining them as representatives of barbarity.<sup>37</sup> Like many vegetarians, the majority of whom practised temperance, Kingsford linked meat-eating with the desire for strong alcohol. As evidence, she cited some hospitals' practice of enforcing a vegetarian diet for their alcoholic patients. Less plausibly, she saw the frequent proximity of slaughterhouses to drinking establishments as further evidence of meat's capacity to incite alcohol consumption, even in the process of its production.<sup>38</sup>

33 Ninon [Anna] Kingsford, 'Art. VIII.—The best food for man', *Westminster Review* 46, no. 2 (1874): 510.

34 Adams, *Sexual Politics*, 20–22, 142.

35 Kingsford, 'Lecture on food', 96.

36 Kingsford, 'Some aspects of vegetarianism', 131.

37 Anna Kingsford, *The Perfect Way in Diet*, 61–62.

38 Anna Kingsford, 'Best food for man', in *Addresses and Essays*, 103.

Vegetarianism was also urged as a societal corrective to prostitution. Kingsford believed that the stimulating and irritating quality of meat products 'influences the genital functions in a powerful degree, and sets up a condition of pressing insatiability' in men. Prostitution was chiefly caused, she contended, by the 'luxurious and intemperate habits of eating and drinking', which she claimed were common among the upper classes. 'Abolish kreophagy [meat-eating] and its companion vice, alcoholism', she urged, 'and more, a thousandfold, will be done to abolish prostitution than can be achieved by any other means soever'.<sup>39</sup> By contrast to the morally corrosive nature of meat-eating, vegetarianism was promoted by Kingsford and other proponents as having the tendency to 'exalt the philanthropic faculties'.<sup>40</sup> It should be stressed, however, that these impacts were only part of Kingsford's larger rationale for vegetarianism, one that foregrounded the right of animals to live free from human-inflicted suffering.

These scientific and social rationales were closely intertwined with Kingsford's distinctive spiritual beliefs. She saw no contradiction in this blended approach, stating that vegetarianism 'appeals to the in-tuitional as well as to the intellectual faculties'.<sup>41</sup> As Samantha Calvert notes in her study of vegetarianism and modern Christianity, the mid-to-late 1800s witnessed the growth of religious and spiritual movements that rejected many of the traditions and anxieties of conventional Christianity.<sup>42</sup> Theosophy was one such influential system of thought, which formed part of a broader esoteric culture in late Victorian counter-cultural circles.<sup>43</sup> Kingsford was a dedicated adherent, along with other prominent women vegetarians including leading spiritualist Annie Besant and, later, the suffragist Margaret Cousins. Theosophy offered an alternative to scientific materialism and conventional Christianity and was especially popular with women, who were granted cosmologically justified equality as well as leadership opportunities.<sup>44</sup> As a Theosophist, Kingsford believed

39 Kingsford, *Perfect Way in Diet*, 58–59. Kingsford often referred to meat-eating as 'kreophagy'.

40 Charles W. Forward, *Fifty Years of Food Reform: A History of the Vegetarian Movement in England* (London: Ideal Pub. Union, 1898), 62.

41 Anna Kingsford, 'Letters on pure diet', in *Addresses and Essays*, 64.

42 Samantha Jane Calvert, 'A taste of Eden: Modern Christianity and vegetarianism', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 58, no. 3 (July 2007): 477.

43 Maitland, *Anna Kingsford*, vol. 2, 123.

44 Leah Leneman, 'The awakened instinct: Vegetarianism and the women's suffrage movement in Britain', *Women's History Review* 6, no. 2 (June 1997): 277; Diana Burfield, 'Theosophy and feminism: Some explorations in nineteenth-century biography' in *Women's Religious Experience: Cross Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Pat Holden (London: Croom Helm, 1983), 35–36.

in the necessity of a radically new way of life: the ‘perfect way’ described in her vegetarian and spiritualist tracts. She argued that modern Victorian society was a deeply flawed pseudo-civilisation, and posited an alternative, authentic civilisation founded on care for animals, women’s equality, non-violence and spiritual fulfilment. Kingsford sought to recover an ancient and untainted version of religion and society that would bring humankind into harmony with God and the environment.

Crucially, this new world would be vegetarian.<sup>45</sup> Respect for animals would not be a side-effect of this new spiritually fulfilled age, but its very catalyst and foundation. She recounted visions and dreams of the ‘sabbath of perfection’ to come, in which animal suffering disappeared as the Biblical Fall was reversed.<sup>46</sup> Meat-eating appeared as ‘the baneful coil of hydra-headed Vice, whose ever-renewing heads we vainly strike, while leaving the body of the dragon untouched’.<sup>47</sup> These experiences confirmed for Kingsford the foundational importance of vegetarianism in any kind of substantive moral, social or religious progress. For this reason Kingsford felt most comfortable speaking amongst the ranks of the Vegetarian Society, with whom she felt she shared the belief that vegetarianism was the ‘bottom and basis’ of all other social and spiritual development.<sup>48</sup> Kingsford affirmed again and again that no progress, including world peace, women’s equality and even the restoration of paradise, could be meaningfully achieved without a basis in abstinence from meat.<sup>49</sup>

Kingsford’s call for an idealised vegetarian future inspired by ‘primitive’ lifestyles engaged explicitly with colonial ideologies. She cited approvingly the vegetarian or near-vegetarian diets of many indigenous populations, detailing their impressive physical capabilities as evidence of the diet’s healthiness.<sup>50</sup> And, like many British vegetarians of the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, she was enthusiastic about Hindu and Buddhist thinking and practices. *The Perfect Way in Diet*, for example, begins with a quotation from Buddha, who entreats a king not to make animal

45 Kingsford, *Perfect Way in Diet*, 118.

46 Anna Kingsford and Edward Maitland, *The Perfect Way; or, The Finding of Christ* (London: John M. Watkins, 1882), 211–13.

47 Maitland, *Anna Kingsford*, vol. 1, 248–49.

48 Maitland, *Anna Kingsford*, vol. 2, 223. For a contemporary iteration of this argument about the broader political potential of veganism/vegetarianism, see Annie Potts and Philip Armstrong, ‘Vegan’, in *Critical Terms for Animal Studies*, ed. Lori Gruen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 305–409.

49 Kingsford, ‘The best food for man’, 510; Hart, ‘Biographical preface’, *Addresses and Essays*, 41.

50 Kingsford, *Perfect Way in Diet*, 20–37.

sacrifices because 'all Life is linked and kin'.<sup>51</sup> However, an assumption of white superiority is evident in some of Kingsford's argumentation. After contending that a shift to vegetarian farming could sustain larger populations, she cautioned that meat dependent white populations risked being overwhelmed:

By restricting the production of offspring in the most highly developed races, or in the most highly cultivated families of any race, the future of the world is virtually abandoned to the lowest types, and these would thus be enabled before long completely to outnumber and suppress the higher.<sup>52</sup>

Rather than reducing numbers of children according to the Malthusian logic salient at the time, she argued that Europeans should adopt land efficient vegetarianism to secure their safe food production and global dominance. Although this idea gained little currency in mainstream discussions about population, her argument inverted an established colonial narrative that vegetarianism made colonised people in India feeble and easier to dominate. The belief that meat abstention could expand, secure, reinvigorate or cleanse white populations was an enduring current of thought in European vegetarianism and associated 'back-to-nature' movements.<sup>53</sup> Half a century later, the vegetarian rhetoric of purification and physical cleansing would be chillingly adopted by fascists in Germany, the United States and elsewhere.<sup>54</sup> Although most Europeans would have disagreed with her proposed methods, Kingsford's urging of the need for the preservation of European supremacy was one of her less controversial ideas.

Despite a fractious relationship with traditional Christianity, Kingsford frequently justified animals' worth and value in biblical terms. She challenged the prevailing belief that Jesus ate meat, arguing that the Bible obliquely revealed otherwise.<sup>55</sup> In one of her earliest novels, a vegetarian character appeals to the saintly meat-free examples of John the Baptist, Catherine of Siena and Francis of Assisi.<sup>56</sup> Kingsford wrote approvingly of

---

51 Kingsford, *Perfect Way in Diet*, x–xi.

52 Kingsford, *Perfect Way in Diet*, 97.

53 Tristram Stuart, *The Bloodless Revolution: A Cultural History of Vegetarianism: From 1600 to Modern Times*, illustrated edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008), 399–417, 424.

54 Stuart, *The Bloodless Revolution*, 436.

55 Kingsford, 'Letters on pure diet', 68.

56 Anna Kingsford, *In My Lady's Chamber: A Speculative Romance, Touching a Few Questions of the Day* (London: J. Burns, 1873), 244.

Saint Francis's depiction of animals as 'living souls with whom, as well as with the sons of men, God's covenant is made'. She provided the caveat that even if animals in fact did *not* have souls and the attendant prospect of eternal life, it was an even worse crime to fill their fleeting existences with suffering.<sup>57</sup> After granting animals the possibility of immortal souls, it was a natural step to bestow them with admirable personality traits. Like many Victorian animal protectionists, Kingsford heightened sympathetic readers' indignation by asserting animals' good moral character: cows were 'patient' and seals 'gentle and intelligent'.<sup>58</sup> At a personal level, she referred to a horse as her friend and professed to prefer the company of her guinea pig Rufus over human companionship.<sup>59</sup>

For Kingsford, non-human animals represented vessels for improving humans' societal, moral and physical health, and a means towards universal spiritual redemption. Importantly, they were also independently worthy beings who, despite a lowly status, deserved protection from death and cruelty. To refrain from killing and eating these creatures constituted not only a way to save animals and better society, but the indispensable groundwork for all other forms of authentic progress. In many ways this vegetarianism was the foundation of her philosophy and advocacy, and it deeply influenced her engagement with another, more popular aspect of animal protectionism in the nineteenth century: the fight against vivisection.

## Antivivisectionism and Vegetarianism

The Victorian antivivisectionist movement encompassed adherents of widely varying political and religious persuasions, united by moral opposition to vivisection. As the practice became more common in British laboratories, opposition flourished in a range of societies and publications. Despite provoking significant hostility and ridicule, the movement attracted the support of many public figures including George Bernard Shaw, Henry Salt, Frances Cobbe, John Henry Newman, Edward Carpenter, Elizabeth Blackwell and, later, Louise Lind af-Hageby. Rank-

---

57 Anna Kingsford, 'From addresses to vegetarians', in *Addresses and Essays*, 150; Kingsford, 'Lecture on food', 97.

58 Ritvo, *Animal Estate*, 142; Anna Kingsford, *Health, Beauty and the Toilet*, 16; Kingsford, *Perfect Way in Diet*, 63.

59 Maitland, *Anna Kingsford*, vol. 2, 54.

and-file antivivisectionists were typically middle class, although Coral Lansbury has revealed high levels of working-class sympathy during the Brown Dog riots of 1907.<sup>60</sup> A striking proportion of participants were women, an observation that has underwritten persistent characterisations of the movement as the preserve of ‘hysterical’ women and a few aberrantly sentimental men.<sup>61</sup> Antivivisectionists’ advocacy usually constituted both a protest against the specific procedures of vivisection, and a more general rejection of a social order that permitted the ‘smooth cool men of science’ to sacrifice the vulnerable, a category that might also include women and children, for the end of human ‘progress’.<sup>62</sup>

Although vegetarians almost universally opposed vivisection, most antivivisectionists focused on the particular evil of vivisection and were less concerned with other forms of animal suffering and death. The ‘arms-length’ relationship between vegetarianism and antivivisectionism can be largely attributed to the difference in scope where it came to the neighbouring movements’ ambitions. Whereas Victorian vegetarians typically sought large-scale societal and spiritual transformation, antivivisectionists held narrower goals, achievable via practical legislative reform.<sup>63</sup> For Frances Power Cobbe, an active leader of the antivivisectionist movement with whom Kingsford sometimes clashed, the act of vivisection was a moral outrage demanding all her formidable campaigning energies, to the exclusion of other animal-related issues including their slaughter for food.<sup>64</sup> The incompatibility of the movements opened antivivisectionists to accusations of hypocrisy and inconsistency, as many within the movement were painfully aware. George Bernard Shaw, an antivivisectionist and vegetarian, complained of finding himself ‘on the same platform with fox hunters, tame stag hunters, men and women whose calendar was divided ... by seasons for killing animals for sport’.<sup>65</sup>

60 Lansbury, *Old Brown Dog*, 23.

61 Mary Ann Elston, ‘Women and anti-vivisection in Victorian England, 1870–1900’, in *Vivisection in Historical Perspective*, ed. N. A. Rupke (London: Croom Helm, 1987), 247; Charles Darwin gave an insight into the gender dynamics of the antivivisection movement by joking that the antivivisectionist R. H. Hutton ‘seems to be a kind of *female Miss Cobbe*’. ‘Literary notes’, *British Medical Journal* 1 (28 May 1904): 1266.

62 Hilda Kean, ‘The “Smooth Cool Men of Science”: The feminist and socialist response to vivisection’, *History Workshop Journal*, no. 40 (1995): 16; Ritvo, *Animal Estate*, 164.

63 French, *Antivivisection and Medical Science*, 213; Leneman, ‘The awakened instinct’, 282.

64 Turner, *Reckoning*, 90.

65 George Bernard Shaw, *The Doctor’s Dilemma: Prefaces on Doctors* (1906; Urbana, IL: Project Gutenberg, 2009).

For Kingsford, however, opposition to vivisection was in many ways an extension of her dual vegetarian impulse to save lowly and innocent animals, and to promote the spiritual uplift of human society. She saw vegetarianism and antivivisectionism as coupled because the practices they combated were deeply connected, asserting in a lecture at Girton College, Cambridge, that ‘Flesh-eating and vivisection are in principle closely related, and both are defended by their advocates on common premises, of which the catch-cries are Utility and the Law of Nature’. Thus, for Kingsford, antivivisectionism and vegetarianism constituted parts of the same struggle against a society governed by ‘men who inculcate on human beings the diet of the tiger, and who teach science by the method of the Spanish Inquisition’.<sup>66</sup> She viewed vivisection as a cruel and unjust assault on a soul possessing being with as much right to life as herself, and as a dangerous attack on the principles of religion, science and civilisation. Although she adapted her antivivisectionism to different audiences, theoretical explanations ultimately came second to her profound sorrow for the vivisected animal, for whose suffering she felt intense and painful sympathy.

Kingsford employed spiritual assaults against prominent vivisectionists, attempting to make herself a ‘spiritual thunderbolt’ against the men she claimed as her foes.<sup>67</sup> Embarrassingly for those antivivisectionists like Cobbe, who did not want the cause associated with such startling esotericism, she appeared to be relatively successful: Kingsford joyfully claimed responsibility for the premature deaths of well-known scientists and vivisectionists Claude Bernard and Paul Bert.<sup>68</sup> These scandalous attacks have contributed to her historiographical positioning as an eccentric extremist within the antivivisectionist movement, either an uncharacteristic anomaly or a radical manifestation of troubling underlying impulses within the movement. French, for example, takes Kingsford’s more extravagant gestures as an overt expression of a general antivivisectionist wish for ‘conspicuously public adherence to certain moral values’, rather than for ending vivisection. Kingsford’s behaviour, he contends, ‘was only the extreme case of the antivivisectionist attempt

66 Kingsford, ‘Lecture on food’, 97.

67 Maitland, *Anna Kingsford*, vol. 1, 251. Pert argues that the attempted spiritual attacks are likely Maitland’s invention, inspired by jealousy and thwarted affection, and aimed at tarnishing her reputation. Maitland’s continued admiration and praise of his companion after her death makes this unlikely. Pert, *Red Cactus*, 206–07.

68 Maitland, *Anna Kingsford*, vol. 2, 286.

to achieve catharsis of the conflicts that arose when medical science threatened the place of animals in the emotional life of the Victorians'.<sup>69</sup> This is a surprising characterisation of a woman so blatantly unconcerned with any form of social conformity.

Three overlapping concerns characterised Kingsford's opposition to vivisection, each of which were underwritten by a fundamental and visceral concern for animal suffering in its own right. Firstly, she viewed the 'torture' of vivisected animals as a violation of moral and spiritual laws that amounted to a form of diabolical sorcery she labelled 'violationism'.<sup>70</sup> Secondly, vivisection was abhorrent to Kingsford and many other antivivisectionists, particularly Cobbe, because it was practised by those entrusted with a society's medical care, who purported to be leaders of progress and science. The fact that educated and supposedly respectable scientists and doctors were conducting the abuse made the violation far worse and represented the pernicious danger of the new scientific materialism.<sup>71</sup> Thirdly, Kingsford shared the common antivivisectionist concern that the utilitarian principles used to justify vivisection on animals might be extended to vulnerable humans, including women and the poor. Although she would not countenance any utilitarian justification for vivisection, as a doctor she also challenged the efficacy of animal experiments in generating the useful medical knowledge upon which vivisectionists pinned their defence.<sup>72</sup> In this position she was supported by other early women doctors, including Elizabeth Blackwell and Frances Hoggan.<sup>73</sup>

Although a detailed exploration of these justifications is beyond the scope of this article, it suffices here to say that Kingsford's antivivisectionism was a complex amalgamation of scientific, spiritual and moral considerations, one that challenges depictions of the antivivisection movement as the last gasp of an anti-modern attitude or as the preserve of 'silly women'—'hysterical' women in Turner's turn of phrase—who were jealous or afraid

---

69 French, *Antivivisection and Medical Science*, 391.

70 Anna Kingsford, "'Violationism' or sorcery in science', *Theosophical Siftings* 3, no. 5 (1890–91): 1–16.

71 Ritvo, *Animal Estate*, 133.

72 Kingsford, 'Violationism', 11.

73 The Women's Medical Association of New York City, *In Memory of Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell and Dr. Emily Blackwell* (New York: N.Y. Acad. Med., 1911), 76–78; Diana Donald, *Women Against Cruelty: Protection of Animals in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 182. Not all women doctors opposed vivisection. To Francis Hoggan's dismay, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson performed vivisections at her New Hospital for Women. Catriona Blake, *The Charge of the Parasols: Women's Entry to the Medical Profession* (London: The Women's Press, 1990), 150.



of the advancing power of science.<sup>74</sup> It is also important to acknowledge that Kingsford's was not only a strictly theoretical nor a religious form of opposition to vivisection. Underlying the abovementioned arguments against vivisection seems to have been deep and painful empathy for the suffering of animals, which we see reflected in her vegetarian as well as her antivivisectionist texts. In Kingsford's recollections of hearing the cries of a vivisected dog for the first time, the acuteness of her unintellectualised distress is clear, preceding and overshadowing other concerns about thwarted justice or corrupted science. She reflected:

Much as I had heard and said, and even written, before that day about vivisection, I found myself then for the first time in its actual presence, and there swept over me a wave of such extreme mental anguish that my heart stood still under it. It was not sorrow, nor was it indignation merely, that I felt; it was nearer despair than these.<sup>75</sup>

Neither, if we afford any credence to her own and Maitland's testimony, was her ostentatious activism merely a form of performative moralism or a veiled attempt at psychological catharsis. Her attempts to save animals in day-to-day life, ruefully recounted by companions, render this explanation unlikely. In one characteristic incident, she was once attacked in the streets of Rome after rushing from her carriage to forcibly prevent a man from abusing his dog.<sup>76</sup>

Returning to French's depiction of antivivisectionists, including Kingsford, as being more focused on being seen than on achieving their professed goals, it appears that such an assessment underplays her deeply held love and concern for animals. French's portrayal absents the animal from his analysis. It indicates an underlying assumption that the spectacle of living and often un-anaesthetised or under-anaesthetised animals being operated on, in procedures that could include burning, amputation, eye gouging and disembowelment, could not in itself be sufficient motivation for opposition. Similarly, Coral Lansbury's suggestion that Kingsford's dramatic gesture stemmed from a quasi-sexual wish for 'vicarious immolation' disregards the likelihood of authentic distress at the reality of a suffering animal.<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>74</sup> Quoted in *Zoophilist*, 1 May 1885, 1; Turner, *Reckoning*, 95. Kean provides a more thorough refutation of the anti-science assessment in "The 'Smooth Cool Men of Science'", 22.

<sup>75</sup> Maitland, *Anna Kingsford*, vol. 1, 75.

<sup>76</sup> Maitland, *Anna Kingsford*, vol. 2, 308.

<sup>77</sup> Lansbury, *Old Brown Dog*, 127.

As Greg Murrie has argued, this kind of explanation operates on the erroneous assumption that humanitarian feeling must always constitute ‘a symptom of an anthropocentric projection of human concerns’.<sup>78</sup> To understand Kingsford’s commitment to animal protection, theoretical explanations or references to other concerns—for example, the identification as a woman with oppressed animals—are helpful but incomplete. Rationales focusing on displaced guilt, psychological idiosyncrasies and women’s anxieties about invasive gynaecological practices may contribute to the picture of her antivivisectionism and vegetarianism but should not eclipse an acknowledgement that she cared deeply for animals in themselves, hated to see or hear them suffering and considered their abuse to be profoundly wrong.

## Feminism and Animal Protectionism

Kingsford was committed to women’s emancipation from a young age. Her father’s determination to share his inheritance equally with his sons and daughters and her husband’s willingness to give his wife complete independence meant Kingsford was able to live an unconventionally free life, but she was nevertheless keenly aware of the injustices faced by women in her society. She sometimes wrote under a male pseudonym because, as she explained in a letter, ‘Much, you know, is permitted to men which to women is forbidden’.<sup>79</sup> As a young woman she campaigned against the discriminatory marriage laws that passed ownership of a woman’s belongings to her husband. Later in her life, as was common for women advocating for animals in this period, Kingsford was accused of being overly and skewedly sentimental and, despite her medical qualifications, unable to understand science.<sup>80</sup>

In 1868 Kingsford published her ‘Essay on the admission of women to the parliamentary franchise’, in which she articulated her case for women’s suffrage and commended the work of the National Society for Women’s Suffrage. Kingsford appealed both to the benefits gained for society by women’s emancipation and to the demands of natural justice. Kingsford

---

78 Greg Murrie, “‘Death-in-life’: Curare, restrictionism and abolitionism in Victorian and Edwardian anti-vivisectionist thought’, in *Animal Death*, ed. Jay Johnston and Fiona Probyn-Rapsey (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2013), 268.

79 Maitland, *Anna Kingsford*, vol. 1, 27.

80 See, for example, ‘Vivisection’, *Nature* 25, no. 645 (1882): 430.

eventually grew disenchanted with what she saw as the mainstream women's movement's depreciation of natural womanhood, but her commitment to women's rights, including the right to vote, remained unequivocal throughout her life.<sup>81</sup>

Kingsford's distinctive understanding of gender relations was rooted in personal spiritual experience and Theosophist teaching. Like other Theosophists, Kingsford rejected Christian doctrine, which demeaned women and prohibited them from leadership positions. She believed that the conventional interpretation of the story of Adam and Eve incorrectly blamed Eve and her sex for humanity's 'fall'. Instead, the metaphorical figure of Adam fell because of the suppression within himself of the force of woman, which represented the intuition of God.<sup>82</sup> As the 'Mother of the Living', Eve embodied morality and intuition, while Adam embodied intellect. The subjection of intuition to intellect, and of femininity to masculinity, was the cause of 'all Manner of Evil and Confusion' in modern society. Therefore, the world could only be redeemed when women, who were 'nearest of all to God' were exalted and restored to their rightful place at 'the Throne of God'.<sup>83</sup>

This belief in women's sacredness went beyond academic hermeneutics. She recounted ecstatic visions in which she claimed to see the female nature of God:

I see Thee now as Woman. Maria is next beside Thee. Thou art Maria. Maria is God. Oh Maria! God as Woman! Oh Maria! God as Woman! Thee, Thee I adore! Maria Aphrodite! Mother! Mother-God!<sup>84</sup>

In another illumination recorded by Maitland, she described women as the 'crown and perfection of humanity' and the 'highest step in the ladder of incarnation'.<sup>85</sup> This conceptualisation of femininity is integral for understanding Kingsford's feminism and its interaction with animal protectionism. Women were at the very least as important and valuable as men, but they were crucially not the same. They certainly did not belong in the disempowered roles Victorian society assigned them, as 'the servants and pleasure providers of the masculine sex', but they did hold

81 Maitland, *Anna Kingsford*, vol. 1, 19.

82 Kingsford and Maitland, *Finding of Christ*, 210–11.

83 Kingsford and Maitland, *Clothed with the Sun*, 53, 68, 85.

84 Kingsford and Maitland, *Clothed with the Sun*, 82.

85 Kingsford and Maitland, *Clothed with the Sun*, 242.

certain inherent qualities and capacities they were destined to fulfil.<sup>86</sup> To some extent, this configuration is a variation on the mainstream Victorian ideology of gender complementarity, which upheld the woman as the nurturing and domestic helpmate to the rational, dominant man, and which figured women as receptive, passive and inferior.<sup>87</sup> However, in Kingsford's view, women's innate 'Graces' made them fit for power, education and world transformation.<sup>88</sup> Their emancipation would, she believed, engender moral progress, freedom for animals and, eventually, spiritual salvation.

What was the relationship between Kingsford's feminist beliefs and her animal protectionism? Part of the answer lies in her identification of women's suffering with that of non-human animals. To some extent, Kingsford saw violence against animals as related to violence against women. She viewed vivisection on 'women and children—any who are unable to protect themselves', as the logical conclusion to the utilitarian defence of the practice on animals, although her aim appears to be to highlight moral hypocrisy rather than to warn of a likely outcome.<sup>89</sup> She also believed that the battles against animal abuse and women's oppression were necessarily intertwined: in her account of the utopian 'upward path' society must eventually follow, the exaltation of women brings about an inevitable outcry against 'the slaughter and torture of our animal brethren'.<sup>90</sup> Kingsford's foremost and inextricably intertwined goals were, as she announced to Maitland at their first meeting, 'justice as between men and women, human and animal'.<sup>91</sup> This is the kind of connection often stressed by historians of antivivisectionist and vegetarian women, and is an idea more recently explored by ecofeminists who assert a link born of shared oppression between women and non-human animals.<sup>92</sup> The case of the animals, the feminist and vegetarian newspaper *Shafts* announced in 1892, 'is the case of the woman'.<sup>93</sup>

86 Ninon [Anna] Kingsford, *An Essay on the Admission of Women to the Parliamentary Franchise* (London: Trubner & Co, 1868), 38.

87 Siv Ellen Kraft, 'Theosophy, gender and the "new woman"', in *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, ed. Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein (Amsterdam: Brill, 2013), 357–58.

88 Anna Kingsford, *Lady's Own Paper*, 5 October 1872.

89 Anna Kingsford and Edward Maitland, 'The doctors and the antivivisection bill', *Examiner*, 17 June 1876.

90 Kingsford and Maitland, *Finding of Christ*, 211–12.

91 Hart, 'Biographical preface', 10.

92 See, for example, French, *Antivivisection and Medical Science*, 336; Lansbury, *Old Brown Dog*, 127; Adams, *Sexual Politics*, 13, 21.

93 *Shafts*, 19 November 1892.

However, Kingsford only occasionally drew a close connection between animal oppression and women's oppression, and almost never implicated her personal suffering or discriminatory experiences within these linkages. Kingsford was much more likely to connect animal suffering to human suffering in general. An evocative example of the tight association she perceived between animal and human abuse is conveyed in a dream she recounted to Maitland and that deeply influenced her antivivisectionism:

I went in my sleep last night from one torture-chamber to another in the underground vaults of a vivisector's laboratory, and in all were men at work lacerating, dissecting, and burning the living flesh of their victims. But these were no longer mere horses or dogs or rabbits; for in each I saw a human shape ... I saw the human shape within writhe and moan as if it were a babe in its mother's womb.<sup>94</sup>

Rather than focusing on women's and animals' common victimhood, Kingsford tended to emphasise the role of women as rescuers, protectors and carers for animals. If women were innately intuitive, emotional and moral, as Kingsford believed, then they were also well positioned and, indeed, morally bound to help vulnerable animals. She exhorted women not to participate in the ornamental use of feathers plucked from live birds on the basis that the ethics of the matter were 'so homely' and 'so important to women, who should be, above all things, merciful'.<sup>95</sup> While insisting that hunting was immoral for both sexes, she specified that women in particular should abhor the sport, because they were entrusted with 'censorship and sanction of morality' and 'direction of the male conscience'.<sup>96</sup> Other vegetarians and animal protectionists shared this idea that women's innate qualities made them ideally suited to the care of animals and especially the avoidance of meat. Food reformer May Yates told an international woman's conference that vegetarianism was the rational conclusion to 'a very proper and womanly conception' of women's responsibilities to animals, while the *Victorian Messenger's* 'Lady's Page' advised readers that abstinence from meat would render them 'more truly and wholly woman'.<sup>97</sup> Kingsford's essentialised ideas of femininity fed into

<sup>94</sup> Maitland, *Anna Kingsford*, vol. 1, 338.

<sup>95</sup> Kingsford, *Perfect Way in Diet*, 111.

<sup>96</sup> Kingsford, *Health, Beauty and the Toilet*, 142–43.

<sup>97</sup> Quoted in Gregory, *Victorians and Vegetarians*, 164; *Women in Social Life: The Transactions of the Social Section of the International Congress of Women, London, July 1899* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1900), 250.

a discourse in which women were especially suited to, and responsible for, the care and protection of animals. In other words, women should care for animals, not necessarily because they were *like* animals, but because of what women were like.

Because Kingsford believed women were especially suited to care for animals, she held special contempt for those women who did not use their 'natural' feminine qualities to this purpose. For Kingsford, women who were complicit in animal abuse were not true women. They were imposters made monstrous or manly by their lack of concern for suffering animals: those who wore feathers in their hats were 'harpies' while willing female spectators at pigeon shootings were 'creatures with the forms and faces of women'.<sup>98</sup> She advised a reader in her 'letters to ladies' column that the cruelties of the seal skin trade should deter any 'good women' from wearing their furs.<sup>99</sup> Rather than identifying these women as victims of a common oppressive system, Kingsford denounced them as oppressors of animals, deeming them especially heinous because they acted in defiance of their natural feminine duties.

Kingsford, with her dramatic proposals to take the place of animals destined for vivisection, has been portrayed by some scholars as the extreme example of the antivivisectionist woman who projected her own pain or even, in Lansbury's account, sexual frustration, onto vivisected animals. Certainly, many antivivisectionist and vegetarian women did draw explicit and personal parallels between the oppression of their own sex and the violence against animals, including Isabella Ford and Constance Lytton.<sup>100</sup> However, explanations that reduce Kingsford's animal protectionism, and that of other women, to a frenzied identification of her female experience with suffering animals overlook key aspects of her thinking and risk uncritically reproducing the prejudiced critiques of vivisection's defenders. Kingsford was a woman who, after all, frequently announced her preference for animals over humans.<sup>101</sup> She was more likely to cast women, with the innately moral and intuitive qualities she assigned to them, as the potential saviours of animals than as their fellow victims. Animals, whether viewed through an antivivisectionist or vegetarian lens,

---

98 Kingsford, 'Aspects of the vegetarian question', in *Addresses and Essays*, 138; Kingsford, *Perfect Way in Diet*, 113.

99 Kingsford, *Health, Beauty and the Toilet*, 16.

100 Isabella Ford, *Women and Socialism* (London: International Labour Party, 1907), 11; Constance Lytton, *Prisons and Prisoners: Some Personal Experiences* (London: William Heinemann, 1914), 12–14.

101 Maitland, *Anna Kingsford*, vol. 1, 46.

mattered to Kingsford in their own right, and her abhorrence of their slaughter and torture was far from a straightforward projection of female anxieties about a system that also hurt women.

## Conclusion

To the mainstream press of her day, Kingsford's ideas were risible and her qualifications suspect. She was pilloried in poetry and prose for what appeared to be extreme and eccentric views and behaviours.<sup>102</sup> Within the vegetarian community, on the other hand, her impact in life and death was more profound. Charles Forward included Kingsford in his 1898 *A History of the Vegetarian Movement*, observing that she demonstrated 'what personal influence will do to advance a cause'.<sup>103</sup> Her writings are known to have influenced, among others, Henry Salt, Edward Maitland, American pacifist Agnes Ryan and a young Mahatma Gandhi. She prefigured and likely helped to inspire the significant proportion of vegetarian suffragettes in the suffrage campaigns of the early twentieth century.<sup>104</sup>

Almost none of her allies universally supported her radical views: an international antivivisectionist committee once expelled Kingsford and Maitland from their ranks after clashes over the issue of women's emancipation, while Salt called Kingsford a 'distinguished and memorable figure' whose unfortunate 'mystic doctrines and revelations' should be charitably overlooked.<sup>105</sup> Nevertheless, after her death she was widely acknowledged for her advocacy of a crucial connection between abstinence from meat and other personal, societal and religious developments. In its account of a memorial held for Kingsford two years after her death, the *Vegetarian* praised Kingsford's advocacy for demonstrating that 'purity of diet is ... the open door to intellectual, physical, and spiritual development'.<sup>106</sup>

102 See, for example, *The World*, 5 March 1888; 'The vegetable boot', *Fun* 35, no. 894 (28 June 1882).

103 Forward, *Fifty Years of Food Reform*, 122.

104 See Leneman, 'The awakened instinct'.

105 Maitland, *Anna Kingsford*, vol. 2, 7; Henry Salt, 'Anna Kingsford', *Vegetarian Review*, February 1896.

106 'The Kingsford commemoration', *Vegetarian*, 1 March 1890.

Kingsford's concepts of gender and the non-human animal were closely intertwined. However, she believed that her vegetarianism and the respect for animals that it entailed lay at the foundation of all other progressive movements, including those for which she also strongly advocated. In the first and most important place, Kingsford's wholehearted commitment to the sacred, scientific and moral imperative to protect animals meant refraining from eating them. It also found its extension in opposing vivisection. Kingsford's opposition to this practice was part of a wider humanitarian hostility towards animal exploitation and suffering, which had vegetarianism at its core. She also believed in a concept of divine womanhood that ought to be elevated in the pursuit of moral, social and spiritual progress. Within this feminine paradigm, women were ideal caretakers for vulnerable animals: they bore particular responsibility for animal care and additional censure in cases of animal abuse.

Kingsford's beliefs and advocacy, with their basis in a transformative vegetarianism intersecting with essentialised but subversive ideas of gender, are evidently not representative of most or all of her animal protectionist contemporaries. Nevertheless, analysing Kingsford's life and ideas in this way is a step towards a more nuanced understanding of the often overlooked Victorian vegetarian movement and its diverse adherents, whose objections to the exploitation of non-human animals were not reducible only to second-hand expressions of other ideas and fears.



This text is taken from *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal: Number 28*,  
published 2022 by ANU Press, The Australian National University,  
Canberra, Australia.

[doi.org/10.22459/LFHJ.28.04](https://doi.org/10.22459/LFHJ.28.04)