

WOMEN, MARRIAGE, AND RIGHTS

- 1765-9** Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England*), a frequently consulted authority:
"By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during her marriage, or at least is incorporated or consolidated into that of her husband, under whose wing, protection and cover, she performs everything." This condition is known as *coverture*.
- 1851** The census reveals that women outnumber men (100 women to 96 men), 7% of middle class women work (4%are governesses, writers, or artists; 3% own businesses or managed farms); only 57% of women over 20 are married, 13% are widowed, and 30% never married.
- 1839** Infant and Child Custody law give mothers who have not committed adultery the right to custody of children younger than 7 and access to older children (before this, the father was automatically awarded custody of all children regardless of the circumstances).
- 1857** The Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act gives courts the right to grant divorces; a wife could divorce on grounds of adultery which includes incest, which subjects him to criminal prosecution, or which involves legal cruelty or criminal desertion for two years; he could divorce her for only one infidelity. (Previously, an ecclesiastical divorce did not allow the parties to remarry; the other form of divorce was granted by an Act of Parliament to a husband proving a wife's adultery.) Also, courts could order a husband to support his wife if separated and could restore a woman's right "to inherit or bequeath her property, to enter into contracts, and to sue or be sued as if she were single." A husband could collect damages for adultery from the correspondent; the wife could not.
- 1864, 1866, 1869**
The Contagious Diseases Acts are passed to protect the military from VD. Women in some garrison towns and seaports who are suspected of being prostitutes could be forced to undergo examination for VD and could be detained in hospital for treatment until given a medical release.
- 1869** Women are given the right to vote in municipal elections.
- 1870** Married Women's Property Act gives wives the right to "separate property," which includes their earnings, investments, and some inheritances left them *after* marriage.
- 1873** Women could be granted custody of children sixteen and younger.
- 1876** Women are allowed to qualify as doctors.
- 1881** The Clitheroe Case. The court rejects the husband's right to seize his wife by force or to imprison her till she submits to his will.
- 1882** Married Women's Property Act gives married women absolute control over their property by giving them a right to property acquired *before* and *after* marriage (however, women still does not have a legal identity equal to that of men).
- 1884** Matrimonial Causes Act allows a wife deserted by an adulterous husband to apply for divorce immediately rather than wait for two years.
- 1885** Criminal law Amendment Act raises the age of sexual consent for a girl 13 to 16 and includes penalties for extramarital sexuality. (In 1895, Oscar Wilde is sentenced to 2 years in prison for homosexuality under this law).
- 1886** The Infants Custody Act gives women the right to be guardians of their own children if the father died; also the welfare of the children becomes a criterion in determining custody, though the father still remains the sole legal guardian during his lifetime.
The Contagious Diseases Acts are repealed.
- 1887** Matrimonial Causes Act allows a less expensive divorce through the courts but not remarriage.
- 1891** A court rules that husbands could not imprison wives to obtain their conjugal rights (though not until 1991 did it become illegal for him to rape her).
- 1918** Women older than 30 may vote for and run for Parliament.
- 1923** The grounds for divorce become the same for both husband and wife.
- 1928** The voting age of women is lowered to 21.