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Women, Class and Social Action in Late-
Victorian and Edwardian London

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Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between class, gender and feminist identity through an examination of women's involvement in philanthropy and social reform in London from 1870 to 1906. Middle-class women's engagement in such work – termed collectively here as 'social action' – has long been claimed as the nursery of first-wave feminist political identity. Numerous historians have framed social action as the means by which women moved from the 'private' to the 'public' sphere and the ground where women developed their claim to a place in national political life in the three decades prior to the upsurge of suffrage campaigning in 1906. Whilst agreeing with this broad narrative of the relationship between social action and feminism, the thesis addresses the lack of discussion of class differences between women in the existing literature on the subject. The forms of social action examined in detail in this thesis were predicated upon this very difference between women: on the belief in the power of the lady to reshape the bodies, characters, homes and workplaces of poor women. Women social activists themselves had a central role in making identities of class, through the dissemination of their expert opinions on the domestic life of the urban poor. In the context of the changing understanding of duty in the later nineteenth century the thesis argues that the agency of femininity in effecting social change came to be seen as of less significance as the century progressed. Women social activists instead drew upon codes of class to justify their work, constructing themselves as authoritative professionals, licenced to speak and act for working-class women. The thesis brings to the fore the (often strained and contested) encounters between lady social activists and the women and men who were their objects of reform using detailed case studies of philanthropic rent-collecting schemes, the London Charity Organisation Society and the women's factory inspectorate. It concludes that social action was indeed the material from which modern feminist identity made itself, but that this identity was founded on middle-class women's differentiation of themselves from working-class women.

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cannot thank them enough for their refusal to believe for a moment my prognostications of doom and intellectual inadequacy last Christmas and for suggesting (in the nicest possible way) that I should just sit down and get on with it. This thesis is dedicated to the four of them with much affection.

List of Abbreviations

COS	Charity Organisation Society
MOH	Medical Officer of Health
NAPSS	National Association for the Promotion of Social Science
NHS	National Health Society
SPEW	Society for the Promotion of the Employment of Women
TUC	Trades Union Congress
WEU	Women's Emancipation Union
WIC	Women's Industrial Council
WPPL	Women's Protective and Provident League
WSPU	Women's Social and Political Union
WTUA	Women's Trades Union Association
WTUL	Women's Trades Union League

[1]

Introduction

Interviewer: Who or what is it that co-ordinate the activities of agents of the political body?

Michel Foucault: ...It's a highly intricate mosaic. During certain periods there appear agents of liaison. Take the example of philanthropy in the early nineteenth century: people appear who make it their business to involve themselves in other people's lives, health, nutrition, housing, then out of this confused set of functions there emerge certain personages, institutions, forms of knowledge: public hygiene, inspectors, social workers, psychologists. And now we are seeing a proliferation of different categories of social work...The interesting thing is to ascertain, not what overall project presides over these developments, but how in terms of strategy, the different pieces were set in place.¹

This thesis traces the involvement of women in the diverse mosaic of 'social work' in London during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It brings together case studies of middle-class women's work in housing management, Charity Organisation, domestic visiting, and official workplace inspection. These activities, which will be broadly characterised as 'social action', form a site for the exploration of class and gender identities at the turn of the century. Although recent research has contributed to our understanding of the changed representations of gendered identities at the *fin de siècle* this work has tended to focus upon the discourse of sexuality. The works of such writers as Mona Caird, Olive Schreiner, Sarah Grand, George Moore and Oscar Wilde, to name but a few, have provided scholars with rich resources with which to explore sexual identity during the period of such epochal moments as the Wilde trial, the Jack the Ripper

¹ *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings by Michel Foucault 1972-1977*, ed. by Colin Gordon (London: Harvester, 1980) p. 62

ders and the debates surrounding the 'New Woman'.² But this thesis takes as its starting point the writings of women who in many cases explicitly distanced themselves from the label New Woman and its political and sexual implications. I will argue that contemporaneous to the 'sexual anarchy' identified by many scholars of the period in question, there was an alternate site of struggle where many middle-class women reshaped their notions of self and their ideas of womanhood. That site was the meeting between middle-class 'ladies' and the poor, the charity 'case' and the factory girl. It was the ideal practice of dutiful work, of work that aimed to reform the social body, which shaped these women and their place in the metropolis at the turn of the century.

During the last twenty years historians have documented women's contributions to such projects of social reform and social investigation quite exhaustively. Out of the political movement of second-wave feminism, under the sign of 'women's history', scholars have attempted to uncover a past 'hidden from history': a past in which women were powerful agents of social and political change and makers of modern society.³ For feminist historians middle-class women's philanthropic work is one vital area in which women can be proved to have been active citizens, widening the sphere of their actions despite their seemingly circumscribed existence during the nineteenth century. Philanthropy was therefore given a central place in the wave of feminist histories introduced during the 1970s which aimed at charting the 'changing roles' of Victorian women.⁴ We now have a wealth of accounts celebrating the achievements of such women,

² Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Virago, 1992); Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (London: Virago, 1992); Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988); Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997); Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: English Feminism and Sexual Morality, 1885-1914* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995)

³ The phrase 'hidden from history' comes from the key manifesto of women's history emergent from second wave feminism, Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden from History* (London: Pluto, 1973)

⁴ For example, Martha Vicinus, ed., *A Widening Sphere: The Changing Roles of Victorian Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977); Lee Holcombe, *Victorian Ladies at Work: Middle-Class*

from the campaigns of Josephine Butler against the Contagious Diseases Acts to the efforts of Helen Bosanquet in establishing a system of training for social workers, with the efforts of innumerable unknown parochial workers in between. The works of Jane Lewis and Julia Parker, for example, have provided detailed studies of both individual women workers and the reforming movements of which they were a part.⁵ Lewis's scholarship is particularly effective in teasing out the intellectual, moral and scientific context of the lives and actions of such women and their social reform work in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

But despite the scholarly attention given to the subject of women and social action over the past two decades, there is still a silence – the silence of political embarrassment perhaps – concerning one essential part of the theory and practice of nineteenth-century philanthropy and social work. That silence surrounds the restatement and affirmation of differences between women, the representation of the cultural, moral and physical divide between women of different classes, which was the foundation of middle-class women's claim to the necessity of social action during the period in question. Ellen Ross and Lori Ginzberg have, in very different ways, approached the issue in recent years: Ross with a study of working-class women's troubled experience of philanthropy 'from below' and Ginzberg through her unparalleled examination of the changing ideologies of gender and class within women's benevolent work in the United States.⁶ There is still a vacancy,

Working Women in England and Wales, 1850-1914 (London: Croom Helm, 1973); Anne Summers, 'A Home from Home: Women's Philanthropic Work in the Nineteenth Century' in *Fit Work for Women* ed. Sandra Burman (London: Croom Helm, 1979) pp. 33-59 remains one of the best analyses of such work in terms of a relationship between the classes.

⁵ Jane Lewis, *Women and Social Action in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1991); Julia Parker, *Women and Welfare: Ten Victorian Women in Public Social Service* (London: Macmillan, 1989)

⁶ Ellen Ross, 'Good and Bad Mothers: Lady Philanthropists and London Housewives Before the First World War' in *Gendered Domains* ed. D. Helly and S. Reverby (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992) pp. 203-224; Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); another study that is sensitive to the work of social action in creating identities of class and gender is Bonnie G. Smith, *Ladies of the*

however, when it comes to the study of the use of languages of class by women social activists in nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain and the effects of such practices upon gender and class identities. It is a vacancy that this thesis aims to fill with an exploration of the process of differentiation between middle-class women and the women and men who were the objects of their social action.

This is an uncomfortable issue for present day feminists to deal with, not only because the idea of ‘women’ as a unified and shared identity outside other material and social divisions has formed the basis of twentieth-century feminism. But also that particular aspect of women’s history – the place of social action in changing the roles of Victorian women – has been taken up as part of the genealogy of feminism itself. In the narratives of feminist history and the history of feminism, social action plays a central role in the making of modern feminist political identity. In the earliest history of the feminist movement, Ray Strachey’s *The Cause* (1928), middle-class women’s social action, from district visiting to national campaigning on behalf of outcast groups, is represented as the nursery of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century suffrage movement.⁷ More recent feminist scholarship, such as the work of Barbara Caine and Philippa Levine, repeats this causal narrative, albeit with more complex analyses.⁸ In looking for the cause, the transformative principle that brought middle-class women through from a dark and cluttered existence in the heart of the high Victorian domestic sphere out into the public

Leisure Class: The Bourgeoisie of Northern France in the Nineteenth Century (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981)

⁷ Ray Strachey, *The Cause: A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain* (London: Bell, 1928 repr. London: Virago, 1978)

⁸ Philippa Levine, *Victorian Feminism, 1850-1900* (Tallahassee: University of Florida Press, 1994); Barbara Caine, *English Feminism, 1780-1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); see also, Philippa Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England: Private Roles and Public Commitment* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990); Olive Banks, *Faces of Feminism: A Study of Feminism as a Social Movement* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1981); Olive Banks, *Becoming a Feminist: The Social Origins of First-Wave Feminism* (Sussex: Harvester, 1986)

domain with the renewed suffrage agitation of the early twentieth century, feminist historians continue to point to social action.

I look at this particular burden of feminist history in more detail shortly, but for now I want to stress the following arguments. Middle-class women's enactment of duty to the less fortunate – the loose category of social action – was an essential part of the re-imagining of gender and class in the later nineteenth century: a re-imagining that made possible the political identity of first-wave feminism. In this thesis I explore how the theory and practice of social action brought into being these new ideas of what it was to be a middle-class woman through an in-depth exploration of the intellectual history of this period and using three detailed case studies. I argue that this process of re-formation, a process that has become an innate part of the history of modern feminism, relied upon the deployment (and creation) of differentiating codes of class by middle-class women social activists. To be those altruistic, educated females who dedicated themselves to the well being of the urban poor, to become this sort of *Ur*-type for early twentieth century feminism, necessitated a constant process of dis-identification from the women and men who were the objects of their dutiful attentions. It is a troubling inheritance for present day feminism, drawn as it is between the need to speak of 'women' as a shared and universal political category and the need to acknowledge the differences of race, sexuality and class. Class, as Beverly Skeggs has argued recently, tends to be squeezed off this crowded platform these days, for reasons I will explore in the next chapter.⁹ But if nothing else, this thesis aims to assert the centrality of class differences to the identity of British

⁹ Skeggs' work is the only major study of class and gender identity in Britain published in the last five years, amid an ever expanding collection of texts on gender as inflected by race, sexuality, ethnicity, religion and disability, see Beverly Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable* (London: Sage, 1997) p. 6

feminism and the need for feminism to address this aspect of its own history in order to understand its present.

Modern feminism was, as I have suggested, in the process of formation during the four decades examined in this thesis. The very label 'feminism' itself only came into common usage in the early twentieth century, and the avoidance of anachronism is one reason for defining historical feminism carefully here. Bearing this in mind, I use the designations of 'feminism' and 'feminists' in a quite specific manner throughout this work. In examining the work of middle-class women social activists during the late Victorian and Edwardian period I limit the ascription of feminism to those active in the movement for women's suffrage and in campaigns associated with the removal of legal disabilities and the promotion of employment opportunities for women. In addition to these discernible markers of political group membership, I use the term 'feminist' to suggest that the individual concerned gave expression to 'women' as a political category united by certain social disabilities, and articulated this in opposition to men.

Few of the women whose work is explored in the following chapters were, in this sense, feminists prior to the renewal of suffrage activity in London from 1906. Many of them did become active in either militant or non-militant suffrage campaigns at this point in the early twentieth century, often citing their involvement in various forms of social action during the previous decades as the experience which led them to adopt a new political analysis. Although I signal the positions adopted by individual women social activists within suffrage (and anti-suffrage) campaigns wherever possible, this study stops short of addressing these campaigns in and of themselves. Instead the thesis concentrates upon women's involvement in social action in the capital from 1870 to around 1906, therefore taking as its subject the work, the place and the era which numerous historians

have presented as the origins of, and necessary pre-conditions for, early twentieth-century suffragette action.¹⁰

This study focuses upon London for two key and interrelated reasons. First, as recent scholarship has suggested, representations of the metropolis played an extremely important role in the re-formation of gender identity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The city – its streets, crowds and public spaces – has been portrayed rightly as the site where literary, social and sexual representations of what it was to be modern, new or just different, took shape and were cultivated.¹¹ As Olive Garnett recorded of her conversation with friends at Cambridge in 1895, ‘Discussion on New Woman. She is not to be found at Newnham, the girls think she is living in lodgings in London, supporting herself’.¹² Even for young women doing the unarguably modern thing of pursuing higher education in halls of residence, the New Woman could only exist in their vision of London: a place of heterodoxy and the free(r) heterosexual sociability of socialist societies, Bloomsbury lodging houses and the British Museum Reading Room. The New Woman could not be imagined living on a parental allowance under the eyes of Wardens and Mistresses, in a town on the fens.

Although this thesis will go on to challenge the predominance of the paradigm of the New Woman and its rather limiting effect upon recent feminist cultural history of the late nineteenth century, I want to retain this identification of London as the central site of

¹⁰ See for example David Rubinstein, *Before the Suffragettes: Women's Emancipation in the 1890s* (Sussex: Harvester, 1986)

¹¹ Janet Wolff, ‘The Invisible *Flâneuse*: Women and the Literature of Modernity’ in *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990); Elizabeth Wilson, ‘The Invisible *Flâneur*’ *New Left Review* 191 (1992) 90-110; Elizabeth Wilson, *The Sphinx and the City: Urban Life, The Control of Disorder and Women* (London: Virago, 1991); Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (London: Harvard University Press, 1995); Sally Ledger, ‘Gissing, the Shopgirl and the New Woman’, *Women: A Cultural Review*, 6:3 (1995) 263-275; Dina Copleman, ‘The Gendered Metropolis: Fin-de-Siècle London’ *Radical History Review* 60 (1994) 38-57

¹² *Olive and Stepniak: The Bloomsbury Diary of Olive Garnett, 1893-1895*, ed. by Barry C. Johnson (Birmingham: Bartletts Press, 1993) p. 214 (27th October, 1895)

cultural change. Moving to London, mixing within its diverse political and social cultures and living at the ‘heart of the empire’ played an extremely important role in the narratives that the female social activists considered in this thesis created of themselves. In the chapters that follow I explore how this story of a new metropolitan identity, the freedom, mobility and employment of educated single women, became interconnected with another master narrative of late nineteenth century London, that of the poverty and pauperism of ‘outcast London’. The latter forms the second reason for my selection of London.

During the last three decades of the nineteenth century London became the focus of anxieties concerning the health of the nation, the strength of the ‘race’ and relations between the ‘educated classes’ and ‘the people’. As Manchester was the setting of visions of unrest and grinding poverty for writers of the 1840s, so London became the ‘shock city’ of the late nineteenth century.¹³ Mapping out the imagined chasm between the East End and West London, journalists, city missionaries, social investigators and reformers gave shape to fears of degeneration, a future decline in imperial power and class conflict.¹⁴ These concerns of race, empire and degeneration re-focussed attention upon the working class in a way that altered philanthropic and state intervention.¹⁵ Charles Booth’s research into the condition of East London, his calculation of one third living in poverty,

¹³ Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities* (London: Odhams, 1963, repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990) pp. 312-319; Andrew Lees, *Cities Perceived: Urban Society in European and American Thought, 1820-1949* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985) pp. 137-139; Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship Between the Classes in Victorian Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971) p. 16; David Feldman and Gareth Stedman Jones eds., *Metropolis London: Histories and Representations Since 1800* (London: Routledge, 1989)

¹⁴ Andrew Mearns, *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* (London, 1883, repr. Bath: Chivers, 1969); Charles Booth ed., *Life and Labour of the People I: East London* (1889, 3rd ed. London: Williams and Norgate, 1891); General Booth, *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (London: Salvation Army, 1890); Charles Masterman ed., *The Heart of the Empire: Discussions of the Problems of Modern City Life with an Essay on Imperialism* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1902)

¹⁵ Bernard Semmel, *Imperialism and Social Reform: English Social Thought, 1895-1914* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1960); Greta Jones, *Social Darwinism and English Thought: The Interaction Between Biological and Social Theory* (Sussex: Harvester, 1980)

published in 1889, could not be dismissed as a regional anomaly when found at the heart of an empire which needed its future citizens, civilizers and soldiers.

As a result of these renewed anxieties, the late Victorian and Edwardian period witnessed the development of many of new forms of expertise in the realm of social action in London. This represents part of the national pattern that led most historians writing prior to the Thatcher era to identify the period as the origin of the modern welfare state.¹⁶ Before the welfare reforms of the 1980s brought into question the Whiggish teleology running from voluntarism to state provision, the late-Victorian and Edwardian period was seen to have represented the contested but steady progress from voluntarism and laissez-faire to professionalism and state provision.¹⁷ Rent collectors, trained volunteers in 'scientific philanthropy', health visitors and school managers were but a few of the new occupations that became available during the period. They were available not just to those who took up the work, but were represented as possibilities for others in periodicals as diverse as *Macmillan's* and *Queen* and the more predictable *Charity Organisation Review* and *Englishwoman's Journal*. With the increased willingness of the London vestries and later the London County Council to accept responsibility for the condition of their poorer inhabitants, these occupations came to be drawn under the auspices of local government from the late 1870s onwards.¹⁸ And it was this expansion,

¹⁶ The basic standard textbook for students of social policy, Derek Fraser, *The Evolution of the British Welfare State: A History of Social Policy since the Industrial Revolution* (London: Macmillan, 1973, 2nd rev. ed. 1984) displays the effect of present day political shifts in its second edition. Fraser not only updated his final section on the future of the welfare state, but more interestingly added a new theoretical Foreword, 'Perspectives on the History of Welfare' in which the Whig interpretation still comes first, but is accompanied by a variety of other models for the interpretation of the history of social policy, including what he terms the 'conspiratorial model' (pp. xxi-xxxii).

¹⁷ For a useful overview of the historiographical shifts occasioned by recent welfare reforms see the Introduction to Jane Lewis, *The Voluntary Sector, The State and Social Work in Britain: The Charity Organisation Society/ Family Welfare Association since 1869* (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1995)

¹⁸ Patricia Hollis, *Ladies Elect: Women in Local Government, 1865-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987); Susan D. Pennybacker, *A Vision for London, 1889-1914: Labour, Everyday Life and the LCC Experiment* (London: Routledge, 1995)

or indeed invention, of the roles of the professional social worker and social investigator, that provided many middle-class women with new opportunities to obtain income, status and authority in London.¹⁹

The different areas of women's involvement in social action that are addressed in the following chapters are linked not just by the frequency with which women moved between these various fields of expertise, but also by the relations of class and gender upon which each of these occupations was predicated. All three areas brought educated, and for now what I will broadly term middle-class women into regular contact with the most deprived portion of the working class. And this encounter was based upon the belief that by the very nature of their sex and social status, these women would alleviate the problems of those they inspected. Middle-class women gained status and made claims concerning the appropriateness of their specialist expertise on the basis of representations of the needs of the very poor 'residuum', slum dwellers and women workers. These needs were constructed by female social reformers as requiring specifically feminine intervention: the creation of true homes from slums, the sympathetic family guidance of the lady visitor, the attentive ear of the lady inspector. Although each chapter will foreground the diverse encounters and effects which each different area of social action entailed, they share as a foundation the premise that is the centre of this thesis. Namely, that the cross-class encounters inherent in such work and the consequent practice of

¹⁹ Of course this pattern of professionalisation and local government provision occurred elsewhere in Britain during the period in question; see Celia Davis, 'The Health Visitor as Mother's Friend: A Woman's Place in Public Health, 1900-1914', *Social History of Medicine* 1 (1988) 39-59, for an account of the regional diversity and debate concerning women health visitors and a brief account of the development of district visiting which preceded and foreshadowed this new profession. Although this thesis is concerned with the particular narratives of class and gender relations consequent upon social action in the capital, valuable work remains to be done concerning the patterns prevalent in other cities; Manchester would prove an especially rich site for such explorations.

managing and representing class differences were fundamental to the development of new female middle-class identities from the 1880s onwards.

In the next chapter I provide a detailed exploration of this process of class identity formation and elucidate the theoretical model used to examine the inter-relationship of class and gender in this context. For now though, a definition of the meaning of class in this thesis may be helpful for the reader. Throughout this thesis I use the term 'class' to designate historically specific discourses, sets of categorisations and practices that mapped onto material inequalities and naturalised those differences. Whilst retaining a belief in material conditions outside discourse, I argue that it was – and is – only through the discursive constructions of 'class' that differing economic positions were experienced, perpetuated and produced as classed identities. Rather than viewing class as a set of objective structures determined by relationships to the means of production, my attention is focussed upon the meanings of class produced by relations of power: the articulation of class as a system of difference and the consequent production of distinctive classed subjectivities.

As these concerns of identity, difference and representation are thus so central to this thesis, here I want to explicate briefly the theoretical perspective that underpins my work, and which receives more detailed consideration in the following chapter. Perhaps the most far-reaching effect of feminist scholarship upon the arts and humanities over the last decade has been to question and de-naturalise the notion of identity. In conjunction with what is termed post-structuralism, feminist theorists have sought to de-stabilise long held assumptions concerning the pre-given nature of identity, a sense of self, the categories of race, class, gender and most recently, of sex itself.²⁰ A growing body of

²⁰ Denise Riley, *'Am I that Name?': Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (London: Macmillan, 1988); Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University

historical scholarship has sought to explore how the subject is not a unitary being, a given entity that pre-exists language and the social, but is something which can only exist through discourse itself.²¹ This de-centred notion of identity theorises the subject as positioned by plays of meanings, by the structures of discourse; it is an identity that is unstable and contingent upon the meaning making practices of any given moment of time, place and social space.²² The category 'woman' and more recently those of 'working class' and 'middle class' have thus been held up to question, not merely in terms of their usefulness as historical descriptors, but as categories assumed to exist or develop outside language, before representation, through biology, experience or economic relations.²³

Of course, the very title of this thesis contains the words 'women' and 'class' – in the shorthand of recent feminist scholarship, 'gender' might have given an instant, accurate indication of my theoretical approach to sexed identity, but I use 'women' instead as a purposefully messy descriptor.²⁴ Taking these two broad categories of

Press, 1988); Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking* (London: Routledge, 1989); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990)

²¹ Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman* (London: Virago, 1986) pp. 5-24; Patrick Joyce, *Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Felicity Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject: Gender and Ideology in Eighteenth Century England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); Regina Gagnier, *Subjectivities: A History of Self-Representation in Britain, 1832-1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991)

²² Of course the work of Michel Foucault has been extremely influential in this rethinking of the construction of the 'self' and in the use of the concept of discourse, see for example Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1 trans. by Robert Hurley (London: Allen Lane, 1979); *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* trans. by Allan Sheridan (London: Allen Lane, 1977)

²³ For this reconsideration of 'class' see Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832-1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1840-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) and *Democratic Subjects*, 1994; Dror Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, 1780-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995)

²⁴ For the polarisation of the history of gender and women's history see Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, Part 1 and the extensive debates in the first issue of the journal *Gender and History*, summed up best in Gisela Bock, 'Women's History and Gender History: Aspects of an International Debate' *Gender and History* 1 (1989) 7-21. Aligning myself with the history of gender, I attempt to follow Scott's recommendation that 'Historians need ... to examine the ways in which gendered identities are substantively constructed and relate their findings to a range of activities, social organisations, and historically specific cultural representations' p. 44. To some extent this division of women's history and the history of gender has been mapped onto the divide between empiricist and post-modernist approaches to the discipline. This is most clearly exemplified in the reviews Joan Scott and Linda Gordon provided of each other's work in *Signs*

women and class I mean to explore how the language of class difference and class identity interwove with that of gender in the narratives female social activists provided of themselves, their work and their place in the social body. Furthermore, I want to indicate how these representational practices produced new forms of female identity essential to the development of the British feminist movement. I follow the work of numerous scholars in arguing that identity can only exist, can only become knowable through the stories we tell ourselves and others; through the narratives which structure our lives and make them meaningful. In this sense I am not analysing representations in this thesis – at least not in the commonly understood meaning of the term, as reflections of some anterior reality.²⁵ Instead I want to examine a diverse array of narratives which gave form to women's involvement in social action and to read from these a process of reformation of female identity. I read these narratives as texts in which the female subjects were embodied, in which a new sense of female identity came into being through the discourses of class and gender. The highly influential work of Joan Scott has indicated how important the language of gender was in the process of reshaping class identities in the nineteenth century.²⁶ What this thesis attempts to do is to read the other way and examine the importance of representing and managing class difference for the reformation of gender identities.

(Summer, 1990) pp. 848-60, see also Deborah Thom, 'A Lop-Sided View: Feminist History or the History of Women?' in Kate Campbell ed. *Critical Feminism: Argument in the Disciplines* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992) pp. 25-53

²⁵ There is of course a vast (and ever increasing) bibliography of recent epistemological debates within the discipline of history that has exhaustingly crossed and re-crossed this territory of post-modernism, the 'real' and representation. See for example David Mayfield and Susan Thorne, 'Social History and its Discontents: Gareth Stedman Jones and the Politics of Language' *Social History* 17.2 (1992) 165-188; Jon Lawrence and Miles Taylor, 'The Poverty of Protest: Gareth Stedman Jones and the Politics of Language – a Reply' *Social History* 18.1 (1993) 1-17; Patrick Joyce, 'The Imaginary Discontents of Social History: A Note of Response...' *Social History* 18.1 (1993); David Mayfield and Susan Thorne, 'Reply' *Social History* 18.2 (1993) 219-233; James Vernon, 'Who's Afraid of the Linguistic Turn? The Politics of Social History and its Discontents' *Social History* 19.1 (1994) 81-97. Although the following chapter will consider these debates in some more detail, my theoretical stance was reached rather more straightforwardly through my lack of training in the empiricist tradition of history and a background in literary studies.

²⁶ Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, Part 3

The connection between social action and feminism gives this inquiry political importance in the field of women's studies. It suggests that there is a history of disparity and differentiation between women in the very origins of modern feminism: a process of exclusion of working-class women that allowed feminist identity itself to come into being. These historical exclusions may help to explain the negligible attention devoted to class differences between women in recent feminist theory and suggest the grounds of a new politics of class within feminist activism.

Drawing a parallel will help to elucidate this point (although the comparison itself raises many questions I cannot address here). During the last twenty years numerous black and non-Western scholars and activists have questioned their exclusion from the mainstream of Western bourgeois liberal feminism, pointing out the racist assumptions implicit in feminist campaigns and political theory in the later twentieth century.²⁷ Looking back to the origins of modern feminism, some have suggested that such exclusions are an innate part of Western feminist history and identity, arguing that the rhetorical and political strategies of first-wave feminism relied heavily upon the representation of certain groups of women as 'Others'.²⁸ By figuring Indian women and enslaved African-Americans, for example, as passive, helpless victims in need of moral enlightenment and emancipation, the assertive political 'Self' of bourgeois liberal feminism came into being.²⁹ Imbricated within the imperial and racial culture of its time, the nineteenth-century women's movement was dependent upon the understanding that

²⁷ One critique which still retains all its power after nearly two decades is Hazel Carby, 'White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood' in Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies ed., *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain* (London: Hutchinson, 1982)

²⁸ See for example bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (London: Pluto, 1982)

²⁹ Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994). The analysis of 'self' and 'other', occident and orient in the construction of modern identity is of course much indebted to Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993).

certain groups of women needed to be spoken for and represented by the projects of liberal feminism, rather than participate within them. Antoinette Burton, among others, has argued that this history must be interrogated in order to address the continuing marginalisation of women of colour within Western feminism.

In the final chapter I explore the relationship between these recent critiques of race, imperialism and feminist history and the subject of this thesis at greater length. Here I just want to suggest that the genealogy of Western liberal feminism was (and is) also bound up with a particular mode of representing working-class women: with a tradition of speaking for and acting in the name of working-class women whilst simultaneously differentiating them from the respectable, autonomous agents of (bourgeois) feminism.

Each of the three case studies in this thesis traces the processes of identification and dis-identification by which middle-class women constructed new representations of themselves, their work and their place in the social body as part of their participation in forms of social action. Rather than reading the published work of well known activists in these fields alone, I contrast these with the more private representations, diaries and letters, of women whose work has previously featured only in the footnotes of existing literature on this subject. My research has led me to look through the carefully constructed accounts of class management in the popular works of Helen Bosanquet and Octavia Hill – to name but two of those who will be discussed later – and beyond to more intimate, immediate accounts of the meeting of the lady visitor and inspector with the deprived, endangered bodies under her gaze. I want to unpick these representations and examine the strategies of management and the constructions of the self, which provided these women with authority over poor families and protected workers.³⁰ It was an

³⁰ On the importance of this notion of the management of the self Nikolas Rose argues “The self” does not pre-exist the form of its social recognition; it is a heterogeneous and a shifting resultant of the social

authority that empowered them to enter the homes of the poor and read what they saw there, assessing whether the families within deserved help and if so what form of assistance was most appropriate. It was an identity that gave them the authority to inspect women's workplaces and make recommendations and implement statutory powers without talking to the workers themselves.

In part, this could read as a narrative of professionalisation.³¹ Middle-class women had the authority to make these interventions because they became members of the ever more powerful professional class, so the argument runs.³² And middle-class women did indeed frequently draw upon the framework of both their own trained professionalism and the need of the poor for such expertise in the course of representing and justifying their social action to the public.³³ Often unable to use the structures of professional associations, qualifying examinations and salaried positions, women social activists formulated professional identities by relying upon sheer self-representation: such workers agreed that professionalism lay in one's attitude to the work, in a constant process of self-development and training, and not in the receipt of an income.³⁴ The

expectations targeted upon it, the social duties accorded it, the norms according to which it is judged, the pleasures and pains that entice and coerce it, the forms of self-inspection inculcated in it, the languages according to which it is spoken about and about which it learns to account for itself in thought and speech... The history of the self should be written at this 'technological' level, in terms of the techniques for... managing the self.' Nikolas Rose, *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self* (London: Routledge, 1990) p. 218. As I will argue in more detail in the following chapter, this management of the self cannot be undertaken without the simultaneous consideration of the self's management of others.

³¹ Theresa Deane has attempted to map women's philanthropic careers onto the sociological structures of professionalisation, see Theresa Deane, 'Late Nineteenth Century Philanthropy: The Case of Louisa Twining' in *Gender, Health and Welfare* ed. Anne Digby and John Stuart (London: Routledge, 1992) pp. 119-142

³² Angela Woollacott has recently traced the changing self-construction of women social activists in the early twentieth century using such a model, in a valuable addition to the sparse literature on middle-class women's identity formation through the practices of such work; Angela Woollacott, 'From Moral to Professional Authority: Secularism, Social Work and Middle-Class Women's Self-Construction in World War I Britain' *Journal of Women's History* 10 (1998) 85-111

³³ In this sense women social activists used similar strategies to their male contemporaries, seeking to secure their status as experts in the new field of the social, see Thomas Haskell, ed., *The Authority of Experts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983)

³⁴ Women social activists did found their own professional associations and develop formal training routes during the latter part of the period of this study, see Biographical Index for examples.

professional was to be distinguished from the amateur by her dedication and focus, not by the possession of one of the few paid positions available in the areas of work examined in this thesis. With such an unsteady social status professional women in the field of social action needed to emphasise the severity of the social problems that they addressed in order to fix their place as workers.

Harold Perkin briefly gestures to middle-class women's involvement in his grand narrative of the rise of professional society in this capacity, as the social activists underpinning the evolution of the welfare state. He identifies the development of the welfare state as the ultimate expression and expansion of the professional ideals of 'trained expertise and selection by merit'.³⁵ But Perkin's argument in this instance flattens out the landscape of class in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The new possibilities for middle-class women, the new ways in which they could express themselves through work and represent themselves as pioneers, experts in a new field, 'glorified spinsters', 'new women' with causes more social than sexual – these were not the self creation of one class (or fraction of a class) and gender. They were instead the products of encounters, contests and conquests between classes and genders. Perkin's magisterial argument that

the rise of the welfare state was the practical expression of the professional ideal. It was initially the attempt to extend to those as yet excluded from professional status the basic security and conditions already enjoyed by the established professions

denies the aspect of dialogue and contest so significant in this reshaping of the social body.³⁶ Middle-class women drew their authority from the class based narratives of femininity whilst engaging in work which challenged that very construction at its core.

³⁵Harold Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England Since 1880* (London: Routledge, 1989) p.155

³⁶ Perkin, 1989 p.9

Too often, historians of women's involvement in social action have documented the achievements of those who made women visible in the public sphere through their social work and thus 'widened the sphere' of acceptable feminine activity outside the home without examining the implication of these activities as a relationship between classes. One of the key representations of such work at the time was as the management of difference, a difference that found its most potent expression through the contrast of the 'lady' philanthropist, case-worker, or inspector with the bodies and homes of the poor. Social action during the period in question was about nothing else if not re-forming these differences and re-imagining the relationship between 'the poor' and the 'educated classes'. Although most historians of this subject do acknowledge that the social status of the women in question was significant in enabling them to undertake the work in the first place, the practice of this work and the manner in which cultures of class and gender came into contention in the midst of it, has received little attention. The central concern of the three case studies that form the last chapters of this thesis is how the narrative practices of women involved in social action reformulated these differences of class: how the written accounts left by women social activists embody a dialogue in which difference was mapped onto the concerns of class rather than those of gender.

Middle-class women's work in the field of social reform and the 'municipal housekeeping' of local government has also long played a very important role in historical narratives of women's success in obtaining female suffrage and full citizenship rights. From the earliest historical accounts of first-wave feminism and the memoirs of suffrage activists, this experience has been represented as a causal factor of middle-class women's self assertion and politicisation prior to the renewal of the suffrage movement in the early

twentieth century.³⁷ Middle-class women's involvement in public service both proved that their special skills were needed in the 'public sphere' and the experience of such work gave these women practical and strategic skills which they later drew upon in the course of organised political campaigning. I am neither dismissing these remarkable achievements of social activists, nor downplaying their highly important impact upon the development of British feminism and the women's movement, quite the reverse. My point is rather to re-examine the influence that practices of social action and the rhetoric of middle-class women's duty to the social exerted within first-wave feminism and the manner in which this significance has been re-presented by second wave women's historians. I want to argue that it is this history, this way of telling the story of the women's movement, which has left present day British feminisms without an adequate means of theorising, speaking about and politicising the co-articulation of gender and class. The successes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century woman's movement owed so much to representations of the practice of managing the working class, it was such an integral part of middle-class feminists' claims to citizenship, that the implications of this work in terms of social class were, and continue to be, silenced.

Middle-class women represented certain sections of the working class as in need of their interventions. They gathered knowledge, authority and narratives of struggle and survival, all of which became an intimate part of the identity of the British women's movement at the turn of the century. Looking back at this period and recovering a past 'hidden from history', feminist historians of the late twentieth century have elided the story of class. The cultural assumptions concerning class difference so taken for granted

³⁷ See for example Emmeline Pethick Lawrence, *My Part in a Changing World* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1938); Emmeline Pankhurst, *My Own Story* (London: Nash, 1914); Isabella O. Ford, 'Women and Socialism' (1907) facsimile repr. in *The Reformers: Socialist Feminism* ed. Marie Mulvey Roberts (London: Routledge, 1993); Strachey, 1928

as to be almost invisible have often escaped historians alert to the construction of gender identities. We have histories of working-class women's lives and culture, we have plenty of research on middle-class women too, and many of the recent theoretical moves within feminism seek to analyse gender as formed in a constructive and contested relationship between the sexes. What I seek to do in this thesis is to assert the importance of a relationship between the classes in the creation of gender identities: to explore how the lives and cultures of a specific group of middle-class women were formed in a surveillance relationship that crossed the lines of class, and often gender too.

Characterising the broad field of social action as a form of surveillance and social control is hardly a novel approach to take. Female agents of the state received their due in this respect from Jacques Donzelot's functionalist use of Foucauldian perspectives in *The Policing of Families*.³⁸ Middle-class women, sanitising, disciplining, making docile the unruly bodies of working-class families; working-class wives in the home aspiring to the bourgeois values thus presented to them, forming outposts of the eye of the state in each home. Even the more heroic individualist accounts of middle-class women's involvement in the development of the welfare state acknowledge regretfully the involvement of such women in overwriting working-class culture with a bourgeois vision of domesticity and family life at odds with the survival strategies and kinship networks of the poor. And it was this aspect of social action that received detailed attention from historians taking the perspective of social control in the late 1970s.³⁹ Even at the time, such an analysis had its critics. 'It many be feared', wrote Donajgrodski,

...that the use of the idea [of social control] commits the social historian to a species of crude reductionism, which doubts the humanity of the humanitarian, sees clergymen, social workers or educators as only and merely policemen without boots, to an approach in short which coarsens

³⁸ Jacques Donzelot, *The Policing of Families* trans Robert Hurley (London: Hutchinson, 1979)

³⁹ J. Donajgrodski ed., *Social Control in Nineteenth Century Britain* (London: Croom Helm, 1977)

our appreciation of the complexity of social relationships and historical processes.⁴⁰

The risks outlined here are certainly ones which are still worth keeping in mind whilst pursuing an approach to social action which characterises its broad function as a form of surveillance. To reduce the women involved in such work to the status of mere 'policemen without boots' would be to deny the significance of a whole body of feminist scholarship that has sought to emphasise female agency in historically overdetermined circumstances. It would also be a strange representation of the field of social action that characterised it primarily in terms of the functionalism of social control, with consensus developed through the incursions of agents of the state. As the following chapters will show, women social activists faced continual opposition and contradiction in the course of their work, both from those subject to it and from those in authority over it.

It is here that the work of Michel Foucault concerning power and surveillance is particularly useful. For drawing upon Foucault's model of power and the manner in which identities are brought into being through its actions allows for an understanding of surveillance in which both the subject and object of the gaze are re-constituted by the effects of power. Foucault argues that 'the individual is not a pre-given identity which is seized on by the exercise of power', but rather the 'individual with his identity and characteristics, is the product of a relation of power exercised over bodies, multiplicities, movements, desires, forces'.⁴¹ I want to argue that the identities of women involved in social action were reshaped decisively by the relationship of power they were involved in with the endangered bodies of the working class. Power following Foucault's model, is never uni-directional, something applied from above and experienced below, but an ebb

⁴⁰ Donajgradski, 1977 p. 1

⁴¹ Gordon ed., 1980 p. 74

and flow which constitutes the individuality of all those within its interstices. To return to my epigraph, I am not searching for the overall project that presided over the development of social work and social action in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Instead I intend to examine the strategies of class and gender by which middle-class women's roles in such projects were confirmed, assured and seen as essential. This was a confirmation that resulted from the reshaping of the self through the surveillance of another class, other bodies and hearing other people's stories.

The next chapter of this thesis focuses upon the subject of class. After some further theoretical exploration of the constitution of identities of class and gender, I go on to examine what I perceive to be the absences within current feminist scholarship concerning the relationship between these two categories. In tracing the reasons for these lacunae I ascribe a central role to what has been the master narrative of nineteenth-century women's history since its first telling, the story of the 'widening sphere' of women's action, from private to public. Middle-class women's involvement in philanthropy and social action has been framed consistently within historiography as the bridge between these two 'spheres' of existence. By seeking out the genealogy of this narrative and assessing the importance to the feminist movement that the story was told in this particular fashion, I foreground the process through which the significance of social action in terms of class was silenced in favour of a narrative about the self-creation of the British women's movement.

The third chapter moves on to consider the concepts of social action and philanthropy and the variety of ways in which they have been theorised by historians, sociologists and anthropologists. I situate my analysis of social action and the surveillance relationship within the intellectual history of the late nineteenth century,

examining the importance of ideas of duty and altruism for contemporary understandings of identity and the relationship of the self to the social. Following through this notion of duty, I explore how the changing significance of the term throughout the late nineteenth century sheds light on the development of 'the social' as sphere of action. I examine how these discursive shifts created a new sense of agency for middle-class women and argue that the history of 'the social' is thus a far more useful way of thinking about gender and history than the model of 'public' and 'private' spheres.

London is the subject of the fourth chapter, in which I explore the intertwining of the narratives of 'outcast London', so key to the work of social reformers in the late nineteenth century metropolis, and the concerns of gender identity which have received so much attention from recent scholars. Retaining the argument that contemporary understandings of duty were essential in the construction of identity, I examine the literary creation of 'The New Woman' and the reaction of social activists to this representation of womanhood. I argue that recent scholars have used this typology of gender far too loosely, applying the label to women whose writings embody a repugnance for the narcissism and selfishness perceived to characterise the 'New Woman'. I argue that social action in the late nineteenth century involved a set of discourses concerning altruism, self and the social which enabled the creation of what I term 'the not-so new woman' – an imagined identity which lay between the 'selfishness' of the 'New Woman' and the lack of self of the old. Using the diaries, letters and memoirs of women involved in social action in London, I explore the negotiation of freedom and duty, urban space and slum courts, a new professional identity and the question of sexuality. The result is a substantial critique of the manner in which London and the 'New Woman' has been represented by

historians in the last decade: a representation in which the act of 'slumming' is given no significance but as the expression of female freedom.

Chapter Five is the first of the three case studies that form the second half of the thesis. The first area of social action that I focus upon is that of housing management and the narratives of rent collectors. Using the writings of Octavia Hill I explore the theory and practice of middle-class women's work in rent collecting and housing management as it developed from the late 1860s. Placing Hill's work within its intellectual context I examine the Ruskinian representations of femininity that Hill negotiated to justify the lady's place as a figure of authority in slum dwellings: a representation that wrote out the possibility of conflict between the lady rent-collector and her tenants. I then move on to consider the writings of the rent-collectors of Katherine Buildings, Whitechapel during the 1880s. Through the letters, diaries and memoirs of Ella Pycroft, Beatrice Webb and Margaret Nevinson I foreground the constant struggles of the rent-collectors to maintain their authority over the tenants. It was a struggle, I argue, that led to the rejection of Hill's formula of feminine authority and the striking adaptation of masculine subject positions, taking the stories of the working-class male tenants of the buildings to make sense of their own life histories.

Chapter Six examines women's work for the London Charity Organisation Society and in particular the practice of interviewing applicants for assistance and visiting the homes of current 'cases'. Taking the idea of character as my main theme, I argue that the intellectual preoccupation with character as the determinate of social destiny gave middle-class women a new and authoritative role in reconstructing the lives of the poor in the 1880s and 1890s. Using the surviving C.O.S. case papers, I analyse the representations that women case workers provided of their encounters with poor applicants for aid.

Through these morally evaluative accounts which aimed to make the character of ‘cases’ clear to the C.O.S. District Committees I trace the ways of seeing and the practices of differentiation that assured middle-class women’s place as experts in this field. I suggest that the process of taking and reshaping these life stories had a profound effect on the identities of these women social workers, as is reflected by their need to write these case histories into their diaries, letters and memoirs as part of their personal history.

The final case study, Chapter Seven, examines the work of women factory inspectors in the 1890s and 1900s and explores their relationship with the contemporary feminist movement. The appointment of the first women factory inspectors in 1893 has been seen to reflect the changing political theory of the feminist movement at the turn of the century, away from the liberal model of *laissez faire* towards a socialist analyses of the problems faced by working-class women. Feminist historians have ascribed this process to middle-class women’s education in the hardships of their working-class ‘sisters’ through the practice of philanthropy and social work. Drawing on the diaries and memoirs of the women factory inspectors, as well as official records, I argue that these professional women did indeed abandon strictly individualist analyses for a marked identification with socialist feminism through the course of their work. But the line of distinction between themselves as educated ladies and the ‘tactless’ working-class women trades unionists they worked alongside continued to be an essential part of their self-construction as the fearless future of feminism.

[2]

Ladies and Women: The Creation of Class and Gender Identities in Social Action

In the codes of class in the nineteenth century there were ladies and then there were women.¹ The two terms expressed more than judgements about manners and refinement: they classified two distinct modes of being female. Where one drew the line exactly, where one perceived that the ladies stopped and the women began, was of course dependent on one's own position in the social structure. But the author of an article in the *Charity Organisation Review* could be sure that his readers knew who (what and why) he was referring to, when he wrote in 1900 that 'the poor love a real lady...and they would rather deal with her than an unknown Committee'.² To be identified as a 'real lady', or to miss the mark and qualify as a mere woman encompassed a complex process of reading the signs of the body and mind; of the deduction of moral, mental and physical capacity by the beholder. There was no understanding of female identity, no representation, no encounter that did not involve a process of recognition and classification within this structure of class. As my analysis of the discourses of women's involvement in social action and social reform will suggest, there was a basic belief in a limited amount of understanding and affinity between 'women' despite different positions occupied in this polarised classification. But beyond this construction of the 'natural' ease of communication between women of all social standings on certain issues (and very few of those), the cultural meanings of class shaped what it was to be female.

¹ Geoffrey Crossick, 'From Gentlemen to the Residuum: Languages of Social Description in Victorian Britain' in Penelope Corfield ed. *Language, History and Class* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) pp. 150-79 (p. 161, 170). Crossick highlights the 'sheer diversity of the public language of social description...almost a chaos of terminology' that pervades Victorian writings, yet finds the only significant terms of demarcation for females those of ladies and women.

² George Hare Leonard, 'The Committee: Its Utility and Purpose' *Charity Organisation Review* August 1900 116-123 (p. 122)

Miss de Pledge took me to see Lady Dilke, 76 Sloane St – who is interested in the appt. of Women Inspectors & wanted to see me. Saw her & Sir Charles & Miss Abraham. All very gracious & reticent... Lady Dilke... said there was a great wish to appoint some Factory-women (those of great ability & power) as Inspectors – same as Working-Men Inspectors. – She has had one or two to stay with her, but tho' very clever, intensely lacking in tact, discretion, power of self-control, knowledge of how to take initiative, or to organise, or to grapple on their own responsibility with work, - & no power of reporting or office work. She wanted Lady Inspectors to be appt'd. & paid extra to train these women gradually to order, method, official work etc.³

Lucy Deane was eager to take up the invitation issued by Lady Emilia Dilke early in 1894. She hoped to secure Dilke's support for her application to Her Majesties Inspectorate of Factories for one of the two new positions of woman inspector.⁴ Though worried about the condition of her dress, she approached the meeting with confidence. She had, after all, had four months' experience in the inspection of women's workshops in her post as Sanitary Inspector for the Kensington vestry, and had qualified as a lecturer on health issues through the National Health Society. But as the extract above suggests, more significant than this was that she was unquestionably a lady: one who had to work for her living, but with an aristocratic patroness who supplied small luxuries and powerful connections.⁵ Despite Dilke's involvement with the Women's Trades Union League, whose representatives held out for the appointment of working-class women trades unionists to the new inspectors posts, she and Deane seemed to concur in their opinion as ladies upon the unsuitability of mere 'women' for such responsibilities. From having two 'factory women' to stay (but of course it was not from this observation alone, rather an entire discursive structure) Emilia Dilke and Lucy Deane could share judgement upon the inadequacies of working-class women.

³ Lucy Deane Business Diary 3rd January, 1894 Warwick University Modern Records Centre MSS 69/1/2

⁴ For a full discussion of the debates surrounding the appointment of female sanitary and factory inspectors in the 1890s see below, Chapter 7.

⁵ Deane and her younger sister Hyacinth were granted a £60 quarterly allowance from Lady Howard de Walden (nee Lucy Cavendish Bentinck) whilst they trained for their respective professions, and once in regular employment Lady Howard sent such gifts as '4 doz. Claret & 2 do. Amontillado' to the sisters, in addition to providing frequent invitations and introductions (MRC MSS 69/1/1). For further discussion of this patronage relationship see below, pp. 241-242.

Dilke and Deane granted these women the abstract mental ability of cleverness, but in the particular context of such professional appointments, envisaged as the fulfillment of decades of effort by women social activists on behalf of working-class women, ‘factory women’ could only be represented through lack and absence. Tact and discretion, so often represented as the natural possession of the idealised nineteenth century feminine, was not of the working woman. Lacking these essential elements of ladyhood, the ‘factory women’ could never be viewed as suitable subjects for the exercise of authority. Reiterating the philanthropic gesture, even towards these outstanding working women, Dilke and Deane agreed on the need for ‘ladies’ to school and contain these unruly bodies and minds to a level fit for female agents of social reform.

It was not qualifications, experience or expertise that marked the difference between the contenders for these posts, but rather that complex construction of gender, class and authority, the late-nineteenth century lady.⁶ And Lucy Deane was secure in her understanding and representation of herself as just such a lady. Graciousness, reticence, authority and above all, tact and self-control, were inscribed in the very bodily *habitus* of the lady. Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of the *habitus* is useful here, for in thinking of those two latter terms, tact and self-control, we now understand them to be something of the social surface, a mode of politely polishing over potentially embarrassing conflicts between the self and others – a matter, even, of dissimulation and performance. But I want to argue that during the period under examination here, tact and self-control were not just ways of seeming, they were also a way of being. They were a key part of that set of imbedded dispositions, those ‘structured structures predisposed to act as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations’, that was the common *habitus* of the lady during the later nineteenth century.⁷ The women whose writings I examine in this thesis believed that the qualities of

⁶ There are, of course, other ways of explaining the disfavour with which the prospect of appointing these ‘factory women’ was viewed – the most significant being these women’s trades’ union background. For further details on the representation of these working-class women as irrationally partisan in comparison to the objective professionalism of the educated lady see below, Ch. 7.

⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) p. 72. Bourdieu also notes that the ‘refusal to surrender to nature... is the mark of dominant groups - who start

tact and self-control went far deeper than the performance of politeness: such qualities expressed an inner truth which located the individual within the structures of both class and moral virtue.⁸ These attributes were there to be read and recognised as the sign of a woman's class position whilst at the same time defining what she was not – a mere woman, signified by the absences that prevented her from ever being a lady. So at the same time that tact, self-control and reticence structured the place of the lady it also served as a means of structuring, a mode of judgement and discrimination between other women. In the event, all the women appointed to the new posts of inspectors of women's workplaces (one of whom was Lucy Deane) were 'ladies', or 'educated women': the 'factory women' never even made it as far as trainee inspectors.

Supporters of the employment of female factory inspectors had urged that women inspectors of any social class naturally would have a closer bond with and greater insight into the conditions of women factory workers than male inspectors. They campaigned for such appointments with the understanding of an affinity that existed between women regardless of class difference.⁹ When it came to the debate on what sort of women should hold this new position of authority however, this unifying vision of sex-identification was discarded by the most influential parties involved. The temporarily useful notion of a shared identity of the female sex was displaced by one in which only the lady qualified for the occupation of authority and the exercise of power. The lady was separated visibly and

with *self-control*' Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 1984) p. 40

⁸ Self-control had a long association with the parameters of female moral virtue as is indicated the novel by Mary Brunton, *Self-Control* (1811), which went through three editions in its first year of publication and in which the heroine learns the benefit of duty, prudence and restraint in marital choices. The lack of self-control exhibited by modern girls was the recurrent subject of moral attack from critics such as Eliza Lynn Linton from the late 1860s, coming to a head with the debates surrounding the phenomenon of the 'New Woman' in the early 1890s, see below pp. 100-111. Such qualities were therefore not just a means of structuring distinctions of class, but the debates surrounding the immorality of the New Woman expressed a dismay that those who should know better deliberately rejected ladylike behaviour whereas the use of the qualities of tact and self-control as a means of distinguishing between the ladies and the women accepted that working-class women simply could not possess such qualities.

⁹ The then Home Secretary HH Asquith's speech to deputation in favour of the appointment of female inspectors in January 1893 concluded with his statement in agreement with the deputation 'that there was the peculiar knowledge, the intuitive and instinctive knowledge which, without complaint and without inquiry, a woman necessarily has of the wants of her own sex...He intended by way of an experiment, in the course of the next financial year to appoint two new women inspectors' (Public Records Office, Home Office Papers, HO 45/9818/B8031).

permanently from working-class women by a divide that could only be crossed by the gestures of philanthropy.

i. The Problem with ‘Women’

This one example of the many instances of classificatory practice that inform this thesis places my specific problematic at the heart of current debates on identity within feminist scholarship. It questions the extent to which ‘women’ can be treated as a unitary category of being and identity and the degree to which other differences between women – in this instance, class – make this conceptualisation of ‘women’ inappropriate.¹⁰ Differences within a shared sexed identity de-stabilise comfortable assumptions concerning an essential shared experience of womanhood as the basis for political activism, sociological or historical research.¹¹ Reading for these differences unsettles the foundation upon which late twentieth century feminist thought has been constructed: the subject group of ‘women’. What this chapter seeks to explore is the very flexibility and contingency of this category ‘women’ within the field of social action: how it was an identity continually cross-cut by the changing constructions of class and gender throughout the late-nineteenth century. And further, I want to examine the investment early-twentieth century feminist retellings of middle-class women’s involvement in philanthropy and social reform had in flattening out these differences – in creating a united subject group of ‘women’ as a political identity with its own history.

With the ever increasing influence of the various bodies of thought commonly labelled post modernism – psychoanalytic theory, deconstruction, Foucauldian concepts of power – recent scholarship has re-conceptualised identity as something fluctuating, unstable and dependent on time and space. No individual is fully saturated with a

¹⁰ Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991); Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1989); Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (London: Women’s Press, 1988)

¹¹ Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) Chapters 1 & 2; Denise Riley, *Am I that Name? Feminism and the Category of ‘Women’ in History* (London: Macmillan, 1988) Chapter 1; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990) pp. 1-6

consciousness of their sexed identity alone in every social situation over time. No one has ever been throughout her lifetime and in all social situations purely a woman (whatever that might mean). Discourses of gender are but one group of meanings among the many through which the subject comes into being in the social. In the context of this thesis, what use is it, then, to talk of 'women' as a category, as a unified and unifying 'experience' of sexed identity, which has its own history, when the representations and negotiations of gender with class produced only a hundred years ago present such a fractured vision?

In choosing to examine middle-class women's involvement in social action, I have purposely selected an area in which the fracturing effect of classification was at the fore. Late nineteenth-century philanthropy and the later developments of governmental sanitary and factory inspection was about the management of difference: about the deployment of *ladies* (and gentlemen too) in order to improve the bodies, minds, homes and workplaces of *women* (but also men). The areas of work which form the subject of the case studies in this thesis brought middle-class women into prolonged contact with the dirty, damaged, unruly bodies, homes and lives of the London 'poor' and the underclass 'residuum' that fell below even that classification which could include the possibility of respectability. I selected this area initially because I wanted to explore the effect that this experience of observing, managing and representing difference had upon middle-class women's sense of identity, their conceptions of what it meant to be female and the 'natural' limits of women's physical, mental and moral capacities. I wanted to assess whether the perception of the physical strength demanded in the domestic and waged work of working-class women led to middle-class women rejecting medicalised prescriptions of feminine delicacy and incapacity. I speculated upon whether the observation of different sexual and familial norms and mores led to an unsettling of their own beliefs and if these encounters disrupted 'ladies' investment in the naturalness and fixity of bourgeois norms of womanhood. In particular, I wanted to examine whether this experience of perceiving and managing women (and men) of a different class had a formative effect in the articulation of new political, social and sexual roles for and by middle-class women

during what has been termed the 'sexual anarchy' of the *fin de siècle* and amid the debates surrounding women's suffrage.

But for reasons I hope to make clear here, I have had to rethink the paradigm of identity formation that informed this initial hypothesis. For even in foregrounding the issue of the different conceptions of gender consequent upon class I retained an assumption of sameness. I put into practice a logic of sexual difference which assumed that a shared sexed identity would be recognised and would be significant despite other differentiating factors. I anticipated that the diaries, letters and case-notes of lady philanthropists and inspectors would disclose a degree of identification with the working women under their gaze *as women*. It was this recognition of an essential core of likeness that had to happen for my initial theory to work. Without such an identification between women social activists and the women under their gaze, my speculations concerning the effect of their work on middle-class women's conceptions of femininity were pointless. For my theoretical approach relied upon the belief that sexed identity was an a priori to the inscriptions of material and cultural class differences and that the latter mediated the particular form taken by gender difference, almost as an afterthought. In short, I believed that 'women' as a shared identity existed outside (before or beyond) class. In the process of research, in reading the representations which women social activists provided of their work and of the objects of their reform I have come to question these assumptions. I have had to historicise this very concept of 'women', place class difference at the centre of my account of this category and trace what role the two played in the work of women social activists.

As the chapters which follow will illustrate, there was little or no identification with the category 'women' on the part of late nineteenth century social activists as a form of identity that cross cut the divisions of class. The social practices and sets of representations that shaped gendered identities were class specific and I want to argue that this specificity prevented the concept of 'women' as a shared experience and identity from having any meaning. This may seem somewhat at odds with the conventional representation of women's involvement in social action, and indeed at first glance, with

the very rhetoric used by some nineteenth-century reformers in public justifications of their activities. For such writings from the mid-century onwards contained frequent instances of the terms of friendship and familial relations to characterise the philanthropist's relationship to 'her' poor. And some present day historians of women and social action have taken on these terms in a rather unproblematic way, reading 'friendship' and 'sisterhood' as expressions of identification, solidarity and allegiance: as anti-individualist groupings. But the language of 'sisterhood' sometimes deployed by social activists was not that political allegiance of women as against men and shared female experience as opposed to male oppression, commonly signified by the use of the term in late-twentieth century feminist thought.¹² It must be situated instead in relation to two nineteenth-century structures of thought: an evangelical Christian ethic that justified philanthropic work in terms of the familial relationship to God as the common father of all and the dominant liberal understanding of the individual's relation to the wider social body.

Within the first understanding of sisterhood, the shared tie was not about political, social or emotional allegiance across other differences. The term rather expressed the belief that both parties were created by the same father with the same spiritual potential, but were nevertheless created as materially, socially and mentally different. The imagined bond of sisterly affinity ran not directly from woman to woman, but up to God and down again. For instance, the housing reformer Octavia Hill conveyed in both her private correspondence and her published fund-raising material an intense spiritual conviction of her connection to 'my dear poor'.¹³ She melded the familial language of sisterhood and motherhood in framing her work in London's slum courts and tenements and wrote of her own need of 'the certainty of the Hand that ever guides the docile child & the humility wh. makes the child-like heart'.¹⁴ Like Lord Shaftesbury, Hill urged the material well-

¹² For an exploration of the changing meaning of this term in relation to nineteenth-century feminism and labour regulation see Rosemary Feurer, 'The Meaning of 'Sisterhood': The British Women's Movement and Protective Labor Legislation, 1870-1900' *Victorian Studies* 31 (1988) 233-60

¹³ Letter to Henrietta Barnett, 12th November 1876, British Library of Political and Economic Science Coll. Misc. 512

¹⁴ Letter to Henrietta Barnett, 26th December 1873, BLPES Coll. Misc. 512. For a more detailed analysis of Hill's work, her use of familial language and her construction of female authority, see below, pp. *.

being of the poor as something inseparable from moral and spiritual improvement: each body, as well as each soul, must be ‘cared for according to the end for which it was formed – fitness for His service’.¹⁵

But in Hill’s writings, this language of affinity, of the spiritual connection between the lady rent collector and her poor women (but also men) was accompanied by a set of judgements of the poor that shatter any inference of the twentieth century meaning of sisterhood.

The chief difficulty of dealing with the poor lies in the worthlessness of large numbers of them, that they are neither trustworthy nor skilful, but they are capable of discipline, and when their affections are called out, can be recalled to better memories and trained to obedience to the latent sense of right and wrong which exists in them.¹⁶

Women slum dwellers were figured repeatedly in her writings as a race apart, as generally untrustworthy creatures who would take any chance they could to outwit the lady rent collector and beg money from her. And it was up to the lady to discern the truth, assert her authority and reform such behaviour through her superior example. This concern with the mendacity and mendacity of the poor reflects Hill’s connection with the highly individualist and anti-statist Charity Organisation Society.¹⁷ It is this deep structure of liberal individualism that therefore forms the second counter to the twentieth-century understanding of ‘sisterhood’.

The nineteenth century meanings of ‘sisterhood’ in the writings of social activists did not imply a reading of sex as class.¹⁸ In rent-collecting, domestic visiting and workplace inspection the use of the rhetoric of sisterhood did not oppose men against women as the fundamental division in society, as a category united by shared oppressions.

¹⁵ Address of 1858 in *Speeches of the Earl of Shaftesbury*, K.G. [1868] (Shannon, 1971) p. 308, quoted by D.W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1993) p. 120

¹⁶ Octavia Hill, *Report of an Attempt to Raise a Few of the London Poor without Gifts* (London: G Meyer n.d. [1869]) p. 4

¹⁷ For further details on the ideals, aims and practices of the C.O.S. see below, pp. 179-188.

¹⁸ Sandra Stanley Holton, *Feminism and Democracy: Women’s Suffrage and Reform Politics in Britain, 1900-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) p. 7 argues that the ‘idea of sex class carried with it an implicit analogy with socialist understandings of inequality’; an understanding of inequality that only took hold within the feminist movement in the late 1890s. The predominance of liberal understandings of the social in the late nineteenth century precluded any widespread representation of sex as class.

For individualism shaped the contemporary vision of the social, of the polity, of rights, duties and hence identity. As I shall explore at greater length in the next chapter, this dominant doctrine of liberal individualism did not rule out a concern for the well-being of the rest of society. In fact, the later nineteenth century witnessed an outpouring of anxiety surrounding the nature of the individual's duty to others and a veneration for the social worth of altruism: anxiety and veneration which were an innate part of liberal thought, not in opposition to it.¹⁹

Just as such structures of thought were important in giving form to the concepts of duty and obligation by which women social activists made sense of their work, so too were these liberal theories inimical to the massified, oppositional political identity of a sex class. The rhetorical tactics of Josephine Butler and her colleagues in the Ladies National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts provide a rare exception to this rule in the field of social action. Butler did offer a unique and striking articulation of 'women' as joined by their suffering at the hands of licentious, polluting men regardless of their class and I will explore the circumstances of this case in more detail in the next chapter.²⁰ Away from the particular politics of power and the female body invoked in Butler's campaigns, however, amongst the workers who took as their more general object the condition of the urban poor, the category of 'women' was rarely invoked as a shared identity.

Writers such as Helen Bosanquet certainly expressed the belief that women social activists were the most appropriate people to offer instruction to poor working-class mothers and housewives.²¹ Yet far from embodying the understanding that this communication was privileged by 'women's' shared experiences and mutual attitudes, Bosanquet's work constantly represented working-class women as lacking and in need of

¹⁹ See Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850-1930* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) pp. 60-90 and below pp. pp. 72-89.

²⁰ For an exploration of the rhetorical and political tactics of Butler's campaigns see Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) pp. 90-112; for Butler's place in the narratives of nineteenth century social action see below pp. 69-72.

²¹ Helen Bosanquet, *The Strength of the People: A Study in Social Economics* (London: Macmillan, 1902) pp. 120-141

basic tuition from the ladies in order to reach even the minimum standards of effective feminine identity as good mothers and efficient housekeepers. Women social activists were to be called by a sense of duty to small groups of poor women and offer them individual help in establishing their families as resilient, independent units. These interventions were dependent upon and justified by the understanding that the two groups involved in such encounters were not the same. Such beliefs could and did co-exist quite comfortably with evangelical discourses concerning an innate and shared spiritual core, lying latent in the urban residuum.

This non-recognition of a shared identity of womanhood on the part of the lady charity visitor, sanitary inspector or rent collector in relation to the women under her gaze unsettles the idea that philanthropy represented the work of women, for women as women. In the present day logic of gender the latter term suggests an idea of equality and an aspiration towards unity and identity that was simply not present during the earlier part of the period in question here. I want to argue that the very idea of a category of 'women' as an inclusive set of shared experiences and as the basis of unified and unifying demands for political and social rights was in the process of formation during the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²² For this particular understanding of 'women' as a mass identity, as the basis for social and political action – a basis more durable than other differences between 'women' – was itself the product of the politicising discourses of feminism. The creation of a politically conscious category of 'women' that had an essential existence outside the bounds of class, an identity that was expressed in opposition to men, was an effect of the discourses of sexual difference which proliferated as a result of feminist political activity in the later nineteenth century.²³ It was not through some sudden consciousness of women's shared experience of sexual oppression that

²² Riley, 1988 pp. 4-7, argues along similar lines, to a rather different end, that 'women' has always been an unstable category, even in its broadest sense and that 'feminism is the site of the systematic fighting out of that instability'.

²³ This relates closely to Gareth Stedman Jones' argument that the class-conscious identities of mid nineteenth-century Chartists resulted not from the objective experiences and structural effects of being in a certain position in relation to the means of production, but rather from the languages of class that proliferated within the Chartist Movement itself. See Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working-Class History, 1832-1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) pp. 94-96

‘women’ came to be understood as a category in which differences of class should be transcended, but through the change in how feminism spoke of the subject ‘women’.

As some (but surprisingly few) feminist critics have observed, even the revolutionary democratic imaginings of Mary Wollstonecraft relied upon an understanding of ‘women’ which clearly excluded servants and working women. By the mid-nineteenth century this silently inflected version of ‘women’ as the basis of political and social vindication had been displaced by feminist discourses which advocated the distinct needs and wrongs of ‘educated women’ whilst using the lives and experiences of working-class women as extreme examples of the pitiable effects of legal, social and political disabilities. In the campaigns and writings of the feminists associated with the Langham Place group and the work of John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor the bodies, voices and life stories of working-class women were marshalled and made to speak to the point of liberal feminism: for property rights, despite the financial impossibility of legal separation and divorce; for the freedom to work without state interference, despite starvation wages and lethal working conditions.²⁴ Working-class women were represented in such writings not as an integral part of the women’s movement, but as the pretext for feminist action.

In Chapter Seven I explore in detail how the growing engagement between feminism and socialism during the 1890s led many middle-class feminist activists to question these liberal representations of working-class women. This reconsideration of the differences between the political demands of working-class women in the labour movement and the formulas of liberal feminism led to a distinct change in how the category ‘women’ was articulated. Feminist political rhetoric evolved to allow for the differing aims and experiences of working and middle-class women whilst enclosing the two groups within a transcendent sex class of ‘women’. Such feminist representations

²⁴ Anna Jameson, *Sisters of Charity and the Communion of Labour: Two Lectures on the Social Employments of Women* (London: Longmans, 1859); Frances Power Cobbe, *The Duties of Women: A Course of Lectures* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1881); John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor, *Essays on Sex Equality* ed. Alice Rossi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). For further discussion of the figuring of poor women in the writings of Anna Jameson, J.S. Mill and Frances Power Cobbe see below pp. 89-98.

emphasised the commonality of 'women', dwelling upon socio-biological characteristics in order to express a coherent political identity in opposition to men. It was only with this new need of feminism for an identity category from which no-one should be excluded on the grounds of class that 'women' as the site of mutual recognition and joint political action came into existence.

In 1907 the feminist and Independent Labour Party activist, Isabella Ford looked back over the previous half century of middle-class women's activity in the social sphere in order to justify the natural affinity between the women's movement and socialism. Arguing against deeply ingrained mutual suspicion and animosity, Ford asserted that whilst socialism had passed 'beyond the earlier stage of mere class warfare', it was also 'impossible...any longer to brand the woman's movement as only a middle-class affair'.²⁵ It was time, she suggested, for both parties to recognise their common aims. In looking for a way to convince both feminists and socialists that their aims had always, really, deep down, been similar and that feminism had never been the narrow middle-class project that the labour movement assumed it was, Ford wrote a little history of women and social action. Ford listed the achievements of middle-class women in philanthropic work, Poor Law administration and local government and their success in obtaining 'proper cottage accommodation and a good water supply', the improvement of the conditions in workhouses and in barring political candidates 'whose moral character was known to be bad'. All these, she concluded 'are part of the Socialist creed'.²⁶ Whilst admitting that such nineteenth century social activists as Mary Carpenter, the pioneer of juvenile reformatories, were 'unconscious' of the connection between their work and the cause of socialism, Ford nevertheless harnessed them in for her end of writing a coherent history for feminism and socialism.

From the perspective of the early twentieth century, Ford needed to write such a history. The suffrage movement had all but abandoned hope of achieving effective parliamentary support from the Liberal Party and had turned its efforts to the fast growing

²⁵ Isabella O. Ford, 'Women and Socialism' (1907) facsimile repr. in *The Reformers* ed. Marie Mulvey Roberts (London: Routledge, 1993) pp. 20, 21

²⁶ Ford, 1907 p. 14

Labour Party. In the light of the long-standing tension between feminists and trades unionists regarding protective labour legislation and the priority of universal manhood suffrage over limited women's suffrage, feminist socialist activists such as Ford sought to paper over the cracks. History, as always, was one of the most effective tools in the construction of this new allegiance. Ford's work was therefore one of the first of a series of histories that attempted to make sense of the twentieth century alliance of socialism and feminism by reading middle-class women's involvement in social work and social reform during the nineteenth century as an emancipatory project, by 'women' for 'women' as 'women'.

Blending over the fiercely individualist beliefs of many women social reformers, and smoothing together the only ever roughly aligned groups of suffrage campaigners and social activists, Ford argued that middle-class women's experience as 'Guardians, Factory Inspectors, Sanitary Inspectors and so forth' had led them to ask for the vote.²⁷ Through their involvement in such forms of social action middle-class women were shown 'with fearful distinctness, that the barbarous state of our marriage and divorce laws, of our laws concerning the custody of children, illegal motherhood and fatherhood, the conditions of our streets and factories etc.: all press most heavily on the lives of *poor* women'. Grouping 'women's reform work' together as a unified whole, Ford suggested that really such work had always been about the recognition of inequalities between 'women' and the attempt to end such differences through wholesale state intervention. She had given the category of 'women' a history reaching far back into the previous century and social action was the site where it all happened.

Over twenty years later, the feminist historian Ray Strachey produced the first history of the British women's movement. In looking for the originary point for the development of feminist action she echoed Ford's essay but pushed the starting point even further back into the nineteenth century. In the wake of the French Revolution, the work of Thomas Paine, William Godwin and of course, Mary Wollstonecraft, Strachey argued;

²⁷ Ford, 1907 p. 17

The surface of things were unaltered; but across the apparently immutable state of society there flowed the searchlight of the philanthropic movement, and this illumination left behind it not only movements to improve the social and material conditions of the people, but also a great awakening of conscience. The young women who lived under its influence saw that the world was unsatisfactory in a great many ways: they saw that old people were poor and hungry, that children were wild and ragged, and that rain came in through cottage roofs: and they realised that they themselves, being 'only women', were powerless to do any substantial good. And from that illumination the Women's Movement sprang.²⁸

Strachey's argument that the genesis of feminist activity lay in middle-class women's involvement in philanthropy and social reform is one that has been repeated in most of the more recent histories of the British women's movement. It has become a central part of the grand narrative of the transformation of (bourgeois) gender relations in the nineteenth century: the idea that women were forced into the 'private sphere' of domestic life during the industrial revolution and then fought their way out over the century into the masculine 'public sphere' of political life through their engagement with causes of social reform. My argument here is neither directed at this model of public and private, which has received ample, effective criticism from feminist historians in the past few years, as I examine shortly, nor the relationship between social reform and feminism in the nineteenth century, which can be clearly substantiated. I want to point out, rather, what has been elided in these histories.

By assuming that 'women' as the subject of feminist discourse has always had the same meaning, the same points of reference and the same idea of inclusivity over time 'women's history' has provided us with a narrative of women and social action in which such work embodied a process of identification. By projecting backwards an idea of 'women' as a shared, universal identity, an idea that only became predominant in the twentieth century, feminist scholarship has tended to silence the processes of differentiation and dis-identification along the lines of class that occurred in the forms of social action examined in this thesis. Such forms of social action were indeed important in the creation of proto-feminist identities during the period in question, but these were

²⁸ Ray Strachey, *The Cause: A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain* (London: G Bell, 1928 repr. London: Virago, 1978) p. 13

identities of gender *and* class, not some universal essence of womanhood. I argue that through the processes of social action in London in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries new ways of being and forms of self representation became possible for middle-class women and these possibilities were made available through a process of dis-identification from the poor women and men under their care.

As the identity category 'women' is therefore implicated in the very objects of this study in terms of its troublesome instability, I use gender as an analytic tool and avoid as far as possible the anachronistic universal of 'women'. Following a broadly Foucauldian model of discourse, I perceive gender as a historically contingent set of representations and representational practices which articulate power and knowledge. The late nineteenth century discourse of gender was both a mode of articulating and reinforcing the divisions between male and female through affixing appropriate identities and a means of signifying other power differences. Although the legitimated, dominant discourse authorises a particular version of the gendered subject – in the case of the late nineteenth century, the bourgeois feminine ideal of the domesticated lady – this dominant discourse is always accompanied by various counter-discourses. Thus it was possible for some women to adapt new gendered identities for themselves with the emergent late nineteenth-century discourses of the 'glorified spinster' or the 'new woman', and for some working-class women to articulate their sex in opposition to the discourse of leisured domesticity. These oppositional forms were themselves shaped in relation to the dominant discourse, even in the moment of refusal. They gained meaning in terms of what they rejected or reshaped from the hegemonic understanding. Even in the moment of dismissing the 'Angel in the House' as little more than a concubine or a useless ornament, counter-discursive texts acknowledged the prior legitimacy of this powerful understanding of bourgeois womanhood through the very attempt to displace it.

In my analysis, discourses of class intertwined with those of gender and provided different modes of being a woman (or a lady). These sets of representations, practices and embodied principles structured the subject's coming into being as a recognisably gendered self. In this sense, gender identity was (and is) created through the experience of

discursive structures. Even the shared physical experiences of 'women' assumed in the mid-twentieth century to form the foundations upon which consciousness raising could be organised, and the basis for the articulation of political identities, is itself discursively mediated and historically contingent. We cannot escape from the sets of representations and practices that enable the recognition of experience as legitimate, which validates it as part of a claim to womanhood. There is a physical (or material) foundation to these identities, but they can only be knowable, and become meaningful within the structures of discourse. For example, the widespread concern with maternal and infant welfare in the early twentieth century provided a discursive construction of 'women' as a group united by the experience of reproduction. It legitimated childbirth and motherhood as essential experiences shared by all women even if, as was the case with many of the childless social activists involved in the establishment of 'schools for mothers', this meant only the experience of the potential for being mothers of the nation. It naturalised the desire for and the skills of motherhood as essential elements of being a woman, paradoxically even at the same moment as it instituted classes to instruct working women in such 'natural' skills.

ii. The Transformation of the Lady

As Joan Scott has argued, it is this attention to discursive systems which allows or even necessitates the study of the interrelationships between gender and class in historical studies.²⁹ Rather than being restricted to an analytic model in which politics and social struggle comes under the sign of class and are read as rooted in the material, whilst sexuality and family life fall under the sign of gender and are interpreted in terms of 'ideology' or the structures of patriarchy, the analysis of discourse discloses the interdependence of these two systems of power. Scott has portrayed the extent to which the language of gender reinforced the articulation of working-class identities in mid-nineteenth century France. What I intend to do in this thesis is explore the extent to which the languages of class deployed by social activists reshaped gender identities.

²⁹ Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, p. 60

Of course, the very phrase ‘languages of class’ invokes a prolonged and extensive debate among labour historians surrounding the so-called ‘linguistic turn’ in historical studies.³⁰ I have no wish to enter into this debate at any length in this thesis. I hope that the formulation of class given in the previous chapter, and which I will take a moment to reiterate here, will be sufficient to make clear my perspective on these debates.

Throughout this thesis I use ‘class’ to designate historically specific discourses, sets of categorisations and practices that mapped onto material inequalities and naturalised those differences. Whilst retaining this belief in material conditions outside discourse, I argue that it was – and is – only through the discursive constructions of ‘class’ that different economic positions were experienced, perpetuated and produced as classed identities. Rather than viewing class as a set of objective structures determined by relationships to the means of production, my attention is focussed upon meanings of class produced by relations of power: the articulation of class as a system of difference and the consequent production of distinctive classed subjectivities.

The women whose writings form the substantive sources for this thesis were, within any objective structure of classification, upper-middle class. The majority were the daughters of doctors, clergymen, dons, gentlemen farmers or medium scale industrialists who had retreated from the day to day running of their businesses.³¹ A few came from more privileged backgrounds: the most notable examples of this are Beatrice Webb, whose family was considerably more wealthy than those of other social activists examined in this work, and Lucy Deane, who was related through the maternal line to the Earl of Falmouth. Some were obliged to support themselves, and had come to London in order to pursue training in social work and to seek out scarce paid posts in these areas. Others held honorary, non-remunerative positions within charitable organisations, but emphasised their professional commitment to the work and its time consuming nature nevertheless. A still smaller group whose writings are considered in this thesis (although this probably characterises the greater number of women who had some involvement in

³⁰ vide Chapter One fn. 21,23 & 25

³¹ For ease of reference I provide full background details on all the women social activists featured in this thesis in the appended Biographical Index.

philanthropic work) undertook voluntary work for a short period of time. They explored it as a possible vocation, or as one contemporary writer put it, participated in the ‘fashionable craze for slumming which broke out like a fever a winter or two ago’ (1888-9).³²

It is possible to see a shift in the broad languages of class that were key to the identities of this group of women over the last three decades of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth. During the 1870s, pleas for volunteers to involve themselves in the new forms organised philanthropy in London, such as rent collecting and district work for the Charity Organisation Society were generally specified by the term ‘lady’, which returns us to the twofold system outlined at the beginning of this chapter. It was the innate qualities that made up a ‘lady’ which were to reform the poor and needy recipients of her attention. Refinement, gentleness, tact and superior moral standards were essential to accepted notions of what a lady was. Reformers imagined that the very confrontation of poor men and women with the visible superiority of the lady would shame and inspire them into self-improvement. In this construction of the philanthropic encounter it was the visualisation of difference as marked in the bodily manner of the lady in contrast to that of poor women that was the very mechanism of reform. The lady and the qualities that made her were innate, fixed – it was perceived as an essential identity of class and gender, in marked contrast to the discursive construction of poor women. For the identities of women slum dwellers were portrayed in such texts as malleable forms, vacuums that had been filled by low morals, the desire for cheap excitement and unruly behaviour through the lack of any more improving example. This negativity could be reformed by the lady, but there is no suggestion in these texts that the lady could ever be altered by these encounters, precisely because the poor were constructed as a negative – unfeminine, not ladies, not respectable.

As the opportunities for systematic philanthropic work expanded during the 1880s, and some paid positions were created, the designation ‘educated woman’ came

³² Eliza Lynn Linton, ‘The Wild Women as Social Insurgents’ *Nineteenth Century* 30 (1891) 596-605 (p. 599)

into greater use in the annual reports of charities and in periodical articles dealing with social action.³³ This new classification is significant, for it marks a move away from the constructions of class and gender that fixed the qualities of a 'lady' by birth, to one which owed more to the individual efforts of an active agent. It provided a discursive space in which women could be defined as subjects in terms of their own achievements and it invoked the possibility of a status position for certain women which was attained by their own work rather than by being adjunct to certain men. But I am consciously avoiding being too definite about this. This did not signal the birth of a meritocracy, for what counted as education in this formula was very indistinct: higher education was certainly not a necessary qualification.

It is clear from the use of the term 'educated women' during the 1880s and 1890s that it was a synecdoche for the increasingly unacceptable 'lady'. The education that counted in the creation of the 'educated woman' was nothing more than the education available to and appropriate for a certain class of female. Not all ladies were therefore educated women but all educated women were ladies. In the discourse of social activists, this new classification therefore served as a double distinction. It excluded lower-middle and working-class women and men from the new occupations that were designated for 'educated women' by the very nature of its self-referential logic.³⁴ Two clear examples of this are to be found in the debates surrounding the appointment of female assistant commissioners for the Royal Commission on Labour 1891-1894 and in the inquiry within the Charity Organisation Society into the creation of the paid posts of District Secretaries in 1883, both of which I examine at length in the later case studies.³⁵

The second distinction evident in the uses of the term 'educated women' was in differentiating the trained worker from the unscientific lady volunteer. It is here that the term starts to blend into the language of 'professional women' which became an increasingly popular construction, subject to investigation, discovery and sometimes

³³ See also the collection of essays by Clara Collet, *Educated Working Women: Essays on the Economic Position of Women Workers in the Middle Classes* (London: PS King, 1902)

³⁴ On the displacement of working- and lower middle-class men by 'educated women' in the field of social action see Eileen Janes Yeo, *The Contest for Social Science* (London: Rivers Oram, 1996) p. 223

³⁵ See below pp. 184-185, 224-229.

celebration, throughout the 1890s and into the early twentieth century.³⁶ A younger generation of female social activists sought to distinguish themselves from the earlier prescriptions of gender and class surrounding the philanthropist. These women, occupying salaried posts as secretaries or organisers for London charities, as the managers of working class dwellings or as lecturers and educators on health and domestic economy, complained of the ‘hopeless gentility’ of older women volunteers, of their unscientific approach to the problem of pauperism and their outmoded sentimentality and gullibility in relation to the poor. The attributes of the lady were no longer perceived as sufficient or useful in the reformation of the social body. And so that discourse of class and gender that constructed the lady as the container of the innate, fixed and essential qualities necessary for the redemption of the poor, was displaced by a construction in which middle-class women needed training – they needed to be given skills. The discourses of gender and class shifted to allow a degree of mutability and the scope for change and improvement in the representation of middle-class womanhood.

Perhaps this one example will make clear the pace and degree of change in this conceptualisation of gender. An appeal for ‘ladies’ to apply for work ‘in connection with the care of tenement houses and the collecting of rents in London’ in 1887 emphasised the open access to such an occupation: ‘A warm heart and cool head are necessary, but no kind of certificate or diploma... anyone undertaking it should have regular, methodical habits, sufficiently good health not to be dependent on the weather [and] the power of writing a clear business letter’.³⁷ Only ten years later an article on the same subject in the same periodical stipulated,

She must also be a trained woman of business. To make both ends meet some knowledge of the building trade is necessary... She must see the ground opened and inspect the drains, and understand the principles of the

³⁶ For further discussion of the representation of ‘professional women’ in London in the 1880s and 1890s, and the anxieties surrounding this and other novel representations of femaleness, see below Chapter Three. See also Margaret Bateson, *Professional Women on their Professions* (London: Cox, 1895) and *Women in the Professions: Being the Professional Section of the International Congress of Women, London July 1899* (London: Fisher and Unwin, 1900)

³⁷ Anon. ‘Women’s Work in Connection with the Housing of the Poor’ *Charity Organisation Review* October 1887 374-80 (pp. 374-5)

different methods of drainage... She must know the comparative advantages of cisterns being placed inside and outside the washhouses, and must be able to devise plans for so laying the water pipes that they may not burst in every frost.³⁸

Now, a new sense of authority in relation to sewage systems might not seem the most likely exemplar of changing understandings of female identity, but there is a wider point to be drawn from this.

As numerous scholars have noted, the economic and social crisis in London in the late 1880s instigated an increased concern with poverty, unemployment and slum housing.³⁹ Social surveys revealed a degree and breadth of poverty that shocked even the instigators of such investigations.⁴⁰ It was partly as a result of this 'discovery' of urban deprivation that some reformers began to argue for increased state intervention, and many charitable bodies asserted the need for trained professionals to take charge of the lives of both the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor. It was within this construction of a newly needy social body that the image of the authoritative, trained professional woman took shape. As the London poor came to be seen as in greater physical and moral distress, so the qualities of the 'lady' were seen to be in need of addition, modernisation and a new degree of specialised skills. The changing needs of the social necessarily related to changing representations of gender, and thus social action was vital in expanding more general ideas as to what a middle-class woman could know, where she could go and what she could do (even if that was only looking down drains).

I am aware that this argument is so far similar to the very familiar one used to position social action and philanthropy in women's history. In this narrative, social action provided a bridge between the respective public and private spheres of masculine and feminine existence, allowing middle-class women a degree of active citizenship that was a

³⁸ Anon. 'The Dwellings of the London Poor' *Charity Organisation Review* 11 (May 1897) 237-48 (pp. 240-1)

³⁹ Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971); Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities* (London: Odhams, 1963)

⁴⁰ Charles Booth launched the social investigation which was to become the series 'Life and Labour in London' in 1888, motivated by what he perceived to be the hysterical overstatement of East End poverty in such publications as *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London*. In fact, he conceded that the survey revealed a far higher degree of 'primary' and 'secondary' poverty than he anticipated, and Booth soon began to support limited central government intervention in the relief of poverty, advocating state old age pensions.

vital precursor to the early twentieth century suffrage campaigns. Such work enabled bourgeois women to escape the confines of a privatised domestic existence and offered them experience in the ‘public sphere’ campaigning for the rights of others, and a place in local government administration, particularly in relation to the Poor Law.⁴¹

Feminist historians and historians of social welfare reform have recently come to characterise this movement as ‘maternalism’, emphasising the importance of such work in sustaining distinctly gendered models of citizenship in the late nineteenth century.⁴² Drawing on the language of social motherhood deployed by nineteenth-century social activists from Anna Jameson onwards, historians have explored how such representations enabled middle-class women to naturalise their work outside the home. Women social activists represented the need for their special ‘maternal’ skills in the spheres of local government and organised charity. Their sympathy, personal touch, care and insight would help re-moralise social relations between the rich and the poor. This argument for the need of both ‘paternal’ and ‘maternal’ elements in social administration formed the basis of middle-class women’s claims to a rightful place in ‘public’ political life.

But the adoption of this model of maternalism and gendered citizenship and consequently, the model of separate gendered spheres of private and public by recent historians presents considerable historiographical problems in the context of this study. I work up against both these models throughout the thesis and I hope to add to the constructive criticism that recent feminist scholarship has directed at the notion of

⁴¹ ‘Whereas women [Poor Law] guardians essentially transferred their expertise from the private to the public sphere and then quietly extended their role, medical women’s work provided a more overt challenge to a patriarchal public sphere’ Anne Digby, ‘Poverty, Health and the Politics of Gender in Britain, 1870-1948’ in Anne Digby and John Stewart eds. *Gender, Health and Welfare* (London: Routledge, 1996) p. 76; on the development of middle-class women’s role in Poor Law administration see also Patricia Hollis, *Ladies Elect: Women and English Local Government, 1865-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987)

⁴² Seth Koven and Sonya Michel eds. *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States* (London: Routledge, 1993) My argument with this portmanteau term ‘maternalism’ receives further attention in the following chapter. For now though – the use of this term by historians of social welfare slips between indicating a specific concern with the welfare of mothers and infants (a development most clearly marked during 1890s and 1900s) and a far more problematic set of meanings surrounding gender, femininity, duty and the philanthropic motive. Jane Lewis has also argued that to the use of the term maternalism by the contributors to Koven and Michel’s collection displays a problematic slipperiness, see ‘Welfare States, Gender, the Family and Women’ *Social History* 19 (1994) 37-55.

‘separate spheres’ as historical device in the process.⁴³ For these two models, in their role as explanatory devices of changing bourgeois gender relations, conceal rather than disclose the workings of relations of power between women of different classes. Maternalism, in particular, naturalises the exercise of authority by middle-class women over other social groups by reading such work as the expression of private, familial affections. I want to think through the implications of exploring the changing conception of the role of the women social activists in terms of class rather than gender alone – bringing to the fore those very differences which tend to be concealed within the familial rhetoric of maternalism. The consequence of this is to provide an aspect of conflict that is elided by the ‘separate spheres’ model of the formation of women’s identities as ‘public’ political subjects.

iii. Women Social Activists and the Making of Class Identities

It is difficult to find historiographical support for a study that seeks to examine class as a division between women, as a point of conflict and a site of identity formation. An important unintentional effect of the narratives of nineteenth-century women’s history has been to hold class static whilst examining the processes of gender formation. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall for example, take as given a classical Marxist structure of the rise of the bourgeoisie as a product of industrialisation and then turn their concentration upon how the articulation of gendered, separate spheres served as an internal dynamic, sustaining and developing middle-class identities throughout the nineteenth century.⁴⁴ Although the authors stress the contingent nature of gender identities as ‘categories continually being forged contested and reworked’, when it comes to class Davidoff and Hall are close to repeating that historiographical approach which they set out to critique.⁴⁵

⁴³ Amanda Vickery, ‘Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronologies of Women’s History’ *Historical Journal* 36 (1993) 383-414; Linda Kerber, ‘Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Women’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History’ *Journal of American History* 75 (1988) 9-39; Carolyn Steedman, “‘Public and Private” in Women’s Lives’ *Journal of Historical Sociology* 3 (1990) 294-303 and see below pp. 94-95

⁴⁴ Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1987 repr. London: Routledge, 1992)

⁴⁵ Davidoff and Hall, 1987 p. 29

For whilst the authors caution against an analysis in which ‘women are defined by their sexuality while men remain gender neutral and are defined by class’, their work fails to demonstrate that women had any active part in the making of class.⁴⁶ Davidoff and Hall’s work is significant in its treatment of gender relations as something quite class specific, for many of the recuperative projects of rescuing the lives and work of middle-class women ‘hidden from history’ failed to acknowledge the interactions between gender and class in their enthusiasm to displace the ‘malestream’ categories of class as the heuristic device of history with that of gender. Those British feminist historians working around the History Workshop tradition, on the other hand, have retained consistent sensitivity to the categories, meanings and identities of class. But as the majority of these studies have sustained the History Workshop movement’s project of ‘history from below’, here too a pre-given category – that of ‘working-class’ – has been accepted and worked within.

Feminist history has therefore been left with an absence around class. The critiques of Marxism which were such an essential part of second wave feminism have served to displace class with the category of gender, as if there was only room on the historical agenda for one concern, one dynamic of identity formation and power relations, at a time.

It is partly because feminism enquires into the self in its concern to distinguish women from man as a social category, and because one of the points of that return has been a dissatisfaction with historical materialism’s privileging of class (narrowly defined) as the determining social experience, economic relation and agency of political change that the limits of Marxist history’s notion of social being, consciousness and politics, and the articulations between them are so clearly revealed. Feminist history has to emancipate itself from class as the organising principle of history, the privileged signifier of social relations and their political representations.⁴⁷

Class as the determining force in history and the creation of identity was the narrative of history which feminist historians had to leave behind. Sally Alexander’s use of the term

⁴⁶ Davidoff and Hall, 1987 p. 29

⁴⁷ Sally Alexander, ‘Women, Class and Sexual Difference in the 1830s and 1840s: Some Reflections on the Writing of a Feminist History’ *History Workshop Journal* 17 (1984) 125-49 (p.131)

emancipation to describe her (and other's) efforts to liberate feminist history from the dominance of class indicates the extent to which these very frameworks themselves gained gendered attributes. The class-based history of Marxism silenced feminism and muted the powerful effects of gender relationships: feminist historians had to liberate themselves from this mastering master narrative in order to provide an understanding of gender. 'Class' as previously imagined had been about the history of men, even if they were subordinated within the capitalist mode of production. But the history of gender relations – embedded within an understanding of the family as the site of social formation – that focussed inevitably on the 'self', the personal and the sexual, all that had historical associations with the feminine. The private process of individuation was to be historicised as a political strategy of liberation from the dominance of the mass public categories of class. For the identity concerns of feminist theory to rise, the Marxist structures of class had to be dismantled.

But the effect of this strategy has been to re-inscribe the division between public and private, male and female, class and gender. It has led to a version of nineteenth-century history in which men experienced and made 'classes' through a process of public, political or economic conflict, whilst women – neatly divided into pre-given class positions – experienced privatised conflicts of gender within their own class and hence articulated conscious sexed identities. The constant point of return in this thesis is the reassertion – to paraphrase E. P. Thompson – that class can be shown to have happened in relationships between women too.⁴⁸ It is not sufficient to divide women into the categories of class and then explore the distinct form that gender identities took in the context of nineteenth and early twentieth century social action. Women social activists in London did not experience class as a given, permeating their private sphere of existence from the outside world of male relatives' economic status. Their working lives were predicated upon the existence of a different class from their own and took practical form in the conflict between different discourses of class surrounding family life, morality,

⁴⁸ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963) p. 8 'I do not see class as a 'structure', nor even as a 'category', but as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships.'

sexuality and work. They were makers of class identities, disseminators of systems of classification, of ways of knowing and reading both the poor and themselves.

This is the paradox and the problem of the subject of class in this thesis. It is both why I think reading social action as a process of the formation of class identities is necessary and why doing it is quite complex. For the very sociological categorisations of class, the practices of the social survey, the area study and the ethnography of the 'culture of poverty' have their intellectual forebears in this period of study. The late nineteenth century witnessed the development of sociology, the belief in the existence of a science of society through which all the questions could be answered once investigators had observed, tabulated and gathered complete knowledge of the social sphere. These systems of knowledge, these ways of viewing and classifying 'others', are paradigms that have their genealogical origin in the late nineteenth century. The 'common sense' structures through which we have come to understand working-class cultures were themselves a product of the projects of social work and social investigation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Women social activists were active producers of these ways of knowing and systems of meaning, in the dissemination of an image of the urban poor in 'outcast London' through their observation of casual labour, radical East End politics, the dock strike and unemployment. They were authorised to write about and speak about their perceptions of poverty and the working classes in social surveys, periodical articles, at conferences and in committees. They had a significant part in effecting a discursive shift in the understanding of poverty and setting a paradigm for the representation of the 'residuum'.⁴⁹

The writer and C.O.S. activist Helen Bosanquet reflected on the power of the social activist to create class identities through such practices after over a decade of being at the forefront of social investigation and debate in the capital. Against those who

⁴⁹ On the creation of the 'residuum' see José Harris, 'Between Civic Virtue and Social Darwinism: the Concept of the Residuum' in *Retrieved Riches: Social Investigation in Britain, 1840-1914* ed. David Englander and Rosemary O'Day (Aldershot: Scolar, 1995) 67-87, although this piece significantly underestimates the part played by the idea of character in this classification.

suggested the process of naming, description and categorisation had no material or moral effects, she argued,

...it may be said that it matters little what we call these people; that either there is such a class or there is not, and that in neither case can our language make any difference... But I think that this is a grave mistake; that this is one of the cases where a false idea of classification tends to mislead us in our action, and to create the very class which it has invented.⁵⁰

In the prevalent contemporary understanding of the urban underclass as a group whose membership was defined primarily in terms of morality and character (or more accurately, by their absence), every interaction between the classes was significant. Through the process of description and classification, Bosanquet acknowledged the power of the social investigator to make classes. By holding up a model of social behaviour and a set of characteristics and naming it – the ‘residuum’, the ‘poor’, the ‘submerged tenth’ – the social activist could bring this group into being. Such power was not limited to the small number of women social activists who achieved a wide audience through their published articles and public speaking. It was not just in the fearful minds of the reading public that these classes came into being. For Bosanquet attributed the capacity to ‘make’ class to every social worker. In every encounter a woman social activist could, through her assumptions and decisions, her language and gestures, attribute and determine the membership of an needy individual as part of a massified social category. In turn, the woman or man defined in this way ‘only too well appreciated’ the meaning of such language and responded with either ‘bitter resentment or degrading acquiescence’, thus coming to be the very identity given to them.⁵¹

Women social activists created class identities through the dissemination of cultural images of working-class life, an understanding that was far more sensitive to differences between ‘women’ than any more materialist formula of income or occupation.⁵² They focussed upon family life, the home and leisure – all the things we

⁵⁰ Helen Bosanquet, *The Strength of the People: A Study in Social Economics* (London: Macmillan, 1902) p. 331

⁵¹ Helen Bosanquet, 1902 p. 332

⁵² Ross McKibbin, ‘Social Class and Social Observation in Edwardian England’ *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 28 (1978) 175-99 (p.177)

now group under the label 'working-class culture'. The writings of the most widely published women social activists and investigators have become standard texts for historical discussions of working-class family life and culture in late nineteenth and early twentieth century London. Ross McKibbin, for example, gives a prime place to such works in a chapter of his book *The Ideologies of Class*, and praises the unique ethnographic insights that these texts provide for the historian of working-class private life.⁵³ The works of Helen Bosanquet, Octavia Hill and the inheritor of their traditions of representation, the District Nurse, Margaret Loane, feature repeatedly as unique sources for the reconstruction of the minutiae of working-class domestic life in the late Victorian and Edwardian period: as commentaries on working-class systems of debt and credit, cooking, sociability, child rearing and sexual mores. And certainly, the presence of the first two women on the Royal Commission on the Poor Law, 1905-1909, suggests that Hill and Bosanquet were accepted as experts on the subject of 'the poor' by their contemporaries.

So what was it that constructed the particular expertise and authority of these women as social investigators and reformers? It was entry into the homes of 'the poor' and a series of judgements on the capability of the 'housewife' within.

Besides her ignorance, the London housewife often has to contend with a hopeless incapacity to spend her money properly. It is not that she cannot make good bargains...But her money when it all comes in on Saturday, is irresistible to her; she cannot remember that it has to last seven days, and spends as if Sunday were the one day of the week.⁵⁴

Bosanquet, like Hill, was heavily involved in the C.O.S., and as one of the Society's most eminent propagandists it is no surprise that she attributed most poverty to the fecklessness, ignorance and intemperance of the poor – to the moral taint of pauperism that alms to the 'undeserving' would only encourage. It was Bosanquet's constant assertion whether in debate with Charles Booth, Seerbohm Rowntree or Beatrice and

⁵³ Ross McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain, 1880-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) Chapter Four; the chapter is a revised version of his 1978 article.

⁵⁴ Helen Bosanquet, *Rich and Poor* (London, 1896) p. 90

Sidney Webb, that ‘primary poverty’ was a rarity in comparison to that caused by faults of character and bad domestic management. In tracing the cause of such ‘secondary poverty’, Bosanquet had no compunction about placing responsibility (or irresponsibility) squarely upon the shoulders of working-class women. She pronounced the existence of a certain type of woman, who existed in ‘the state of mind of the child, with all the vigour and brightness of the child worn away from it’, a ‘poor slattern, hopelessly lost in the muddle of every day’.⁵⁵

Let us look at the woman’s share of the matter. What is she doing that she has ‘no time’ to keep home and children clean? Perhaps she is at work, supplementing her husband’s earnings, bringing more money into the house, and strengthening our conviction that the difficulty is hardly one of money at all. More likely she spends long hours gossiping with like-minded neighbours – shrill, futile gossip, which serves to pass the time.⁵⁶

This set judgements on the home life, management and of course the moral ‘character’ of working-class women was far from the sole possession of Helen Bosanquet during this period. Similar cultural constructions appear in the writings of Octavia Hill, women rent collectors, numerous other women workers for the C.O.S. and in the published works of Margaret Loane and Lady Florence Bell.

This process of observation and the identification of working-class women’s ineffective management stemmed from the techniques of visiting the poor in their own homes: a practice that had been framed as the duty of privileged women from well before the beginning of the nineteenth century. The practice of paying a home visit to applicants for aid was a codified subject of instruction within the London C.O.S. from the 1880s onwards, as I shall explore in detail in Chapter Six. Women volunteers were trained how to enter the homes of the poor, to read the objects they saw there and to form a judgement regarding the character of the inhabitants from these material signs. Their authority lay in classifying the working-class domestic space and identifying from this the nature of the

⁵⁵ Helen Bosanquet, 1902 pp. 104-5. This perception of the arrested emotional and moral development of slum mothers was also voiced by many other women social activists of the time, see for example Margaret McMillan’s recollections of her sister Rachel’s work discussed by Carolyn Steedman in *Childhood, Culture and Class in Britain: Margaret McMillan, 1860-1931* (London: Virago, 1990) p. 29.

⁵⁶ Helen Bosanquet, 1902 p. 103

family who lived there. The London C.O.S. had insisted that the male head of household be the chief applicant to their offices for assistance during the 1870s. But it is clear from the surviving case papers of the Society and from articles in the *Charity Organisation Review* that by the mid-1880s it had become accepted practice for wives and mothers to deal with C.O.S. investigators, visitors and almsgivers – if indeed, it had ever been otherwise in practice.

So this perception and encoding of the cultural differences between the London ‘poor’ and the ‘educated classes’ was founded upon the encounter of the lady with the working-class housewife.

I visited the home...& saw...the wife. The room in which they all live is a large one, about 18 feet by 16 feet & a very good height & with two large windows, one of which was open. The room was not unpleasant, though I cannot say that it was either clean or tidy, but Mrs O’Hara said that she had been out at work yesterday & had not been able to do anything to it. Some drawers half open revealed things of longer standing than one day. The baby, 9 months old, sleeps with the parents & the others (the eldest is 7 years old) in one bed in the corner. Mrs O’Hara says she can see after them so much better than if they were in the second room, argued that their living in the one room saved firing.⁵⁷

Now this example comes from an unpublished source; a report to a District Committee of the C.O.S. intended for the eyes of that Committee only. But the parallels with the commentaries and constructions of Bosanquet’s social investigations are clear. The lady visitor pieced together a classification of the family by placing the working-class housewife in the centre of the picture. The signifiers of the room overcrowded by ‘choice’, longstanding disorder, and a mother who privileged paid employment over good domestic management constructed the family as part of the ‘degraded’ class of the poor and the lady visitor as a necessary expert. The point I want to make here is that too often the analysis of historical discourses focuses upon a few well-known, widely published texts. In looking at such private sources however, I want to emphasise how widespread these discursive practices were – how important such representations were in the

⁵⁷ London Metropolitan Archives, Hammersmith and Fulham District C.O.S. casepapers report of home visit, 6th January, 1903 A/FWA/HF/B2/6

formation of not just a select group of experts, but to the identities of large numbers of middle-class women in the metropolis.

Within this system of meanings, through the process of this mediation and re-articulation of the experience of social action, these women themselves were positioned as a new form of gendered and, most importantly here, classed identity. They became experts, professionals, authorities, asked to speak about, write about, to further understandings of class as expressed through gender and the private realm. For middle-class women social investigators and activists, this constant process of classification, of differentiation between themselves and the poor, provided them with a means of articulating their identities in which their sex was less important than their class. It was the dis-identification of the educated woman from the poor housewife that enabled this reformulation and the affirmation of distinct, class-conscious middle-class female identities. Through these modes of representing the social, differences between men and women of the same class came to appear less distinct, problematic and insurmountable. Instead the line of distinction was drawn firmly between women of different classes.

[3]

‘The One Safe, True Way of Progress’: Duty, Social Reform and the Reformation of the Social

In her autobiography, *My Part in a Changing World*, the former militant suffragette Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence reflected upon her motives in taking up social work within the West London Mission in the early 1890s.¹ Noting the ‘profound impression’ that Walter Besant’s novel *The Children of Gibeon* made upon her, in enabling her to imagine that she too might have a role to play in improving the lives of ‘factory girls’, Pethick-Lawrence continues:²

Which of these entangled impulses that were keeping my mind in unrest was the strongest? Was it the desire to do something definite and make something out of my life, was it the desire to serve, or was it the desire to achieve independence? I do not know.³

Within the teleology of the narrative, however, these questions soon cease to be very significant: social action is once again presented as a couple of chapters of experience that serve as a prelude to the true cause of the Women’s Social and Political Union, and later the Women’s Freedom League. But this momentary pause and uncertainty in a text permeated with a post-Freudian hindsight of certainty and knowingness about the motivations of a younger self, calls for some attention.⁴

¹ For Pethick-Lawrence’s work in, and the nature of, the Methodist West London Mission see entry in Biographical Index

² Walter Besant, *The Children of Gibeon* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1887) For the significance of such fictions of philanthropy in the East End and their part in reshaping the subjectivities of social activists, see below pp. 101-111.

³ Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, *My Part in a Changing World* (London: Gollancz, 1938) p. 67

⁴ Chapter Three of Pethick-Lawrence’s autobiography, from which this quotation is taken is summarised as ‘my bewilderments about sex’, and the author’s aside concerning her mixed motivations in pursuing social work is followed immediately by the pseudo-psychoanalytic diagnosis that, ‘Possibly the absence of desire for marriage was connected with a vague feeling that I was not the kind of girl to attract a mate...I was shy,

Pethick-Lawrence's short aside offers three very different visions of the female subject and social action. There is the possibility that the work offered a process of *self-formation* – the chance to fix an identity around a definite point and therefore to make something of her life through the most obvious avenue of purposefulness and activity. Alternatively, the lure of social action is construed as *self-abnegation* – the giving of the (already defined) subject to the service of others, shaping oneself to the evident needs of the poor. Third, Pethick-Lawrence suggests that social action may have offered an already fixed and focussed female the opportunity to break away from the claims of family duties and a chance to move from dependence to independence – a move that was frequently framed in the late nineteenth century as an alarming display of unwomanly *selfishness*.

I have already suggested in the previous chapter the investment of early twentieth century feminist histories in this third version of middle-class women's involvement in social action. The creation of the political subject 'women' called for a tight narrative that charted the history of a constant category, moving continually towards the end goal of female suffrage, from the private to the public sphere. But in this chapter I want to explore the other two aspects of middle-class women's subjectivity in relation to social action that Pethick-Lawrence could not disentangle from the desire for independence: I examine the role of the idea of duty in reshaping the identities of middle-class female social activists. After a brief examination of the concepts of duty, altruism and service and their place in the historiography of philanthropy and social reform I go on to explore the intellectual history of duty in the context of women's social activism. Introducing the three areas of work examined in the later case studies I foreground the differing inflections of duty and

immature, and had a mixed inferiority and superiority complex.' p. 67. For further examples of this retrospective post-Freudian reading of women and social action in the 1880s and 1890s see Katherine Furse, *Hearts and Pomegranates: The Story of Forty Five Years, 1875-1920* (London: Peter Davis, 1940).

the gendered subject evident in each of these fields during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the final section I explore the use of the rhetoric of middle-class women's duty (particularly in relation to poor women) by nineteenth-century feminist writers. Following the work of Denise Riley, I aim to indicate the intimate relationship between changing understandings of the nature of obligation, the development of the idea of 'the social' and the origin of feminism in the nineteenth century.⁵

The question of middle-class women's motivation in taking up philanthropic work, social reform and social work in the nineteenth century has resulted in a multiplicity of possible answers from late-twentieth century historians, not dissimilar to Pethick-Lawrence's own uncertainty. Frank Prochaska argues that philanthropic work offered 'deliverance from the stitch-stitch-church-stitch routine of female existence', but as Anne Summers has suggested, leisure (or boredom) was a necessary but not sufficient condition for middle-class women's involvement in social work.⁶ Social action certainly did offer middle-class women something definite and different to do, apart from the domestic routine of family duties – an opportunity, as Pethick-Lawrence puts it, to make something of her life – but why this particular sort of work?

The work of Jane Lewis, among other recent scholars, in indicating the deployment of gendered concepts of citizenship by female social activists in the late nineteenth century has suggested some possible answers to this question. Lewis argues that this concept of citizenship posed middle-class male duty in terms of responsibility to both the 'public' and 'private' spheres, whilst female duty was figured as an obligation 'to

⁵ Denise Riley, *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (London: Macmillan, 1988)

⁶ Frank Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980) p. 11; Anne Summers, 'A Home from Home: Women's Philanthropic Work in the Nineteenth Century' in Sandra Burman ed. *Fit Work for Women* (London: Croom Helm, 1979) p. 38

their own families, and, it was argued, the families of the less fortunate'.⁷ Within this framework, social action provided a means for middle-class women to extend their sphere of existence without coming into direct conflict with the prescriptions of middle-class femininity. I have already indicated some of the problems with this 'gender only' analysis in the previous chapter, and I will continue this critique in the light of late nineteenth-century social theory later in this chapter. Here I want to explore the implications for the female middle-class subject of using social action and the perceived needs of others – the poor and the urban working-classes – as a means to 'make something of [one's] life'.

In order to do this, I will now turn to the body of work that examines philanthropy and social action as a relationship between the classes. Alan Kidd's refreshing recent call for 'new, more theoretically self-conscious, social histories of philanthropy' criticises the tendency for analyses of the subject to divide into two camps.⁸ Kidd suggests that one group of scholars indicate that such activities reflected the kindness of historical actors towards suffering social groups, and the other, that philanthropy and by implication, social work, represented attempts at social control or surveillance of the working-classes by the middle-classes. Scholars of the first persuasion, Frank Prochaska prominent among them, read charitable and reforming activities as the natural result of such seemingly unproblematic human qualities as altruism, pity and a sense of social obligation. And indeed, the memoirs and autobiographies of women involved in such work provide plenty of apparently straightforward evidence for this view. Margaret Nevinson recalled her time rent collecting and running a girl's club in conjunction with the reformers surrounding Toynbee Hall and suggested that 'we all met

⁷ Jane Lewis, *Women and Social Action in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1991) p. 7; see also, Seth Koven and Sonya Michel eds., *Mother of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States* (London: Routledge, 1993); Anne Digby and John Stuart eds., *Gender, Health and Welfare* (London: Routledge, 1996)

⁸ Alan Kidd, 'Philanthropy and the 'Social History Paradigm'' *Social History* 21 (1996) 180-92 (p. 186)

in Whitechapel with some ill-defined notion of sharing what we had of knowledge, art, music and beauty with those who had so little'.⁹ Pethick-Lawrence remembered her early philanthropic work as 'an attempt to help individuals to a happier and more successful life'.¹⁰ Contemporary sources also abound with the language of friendship, kindness and sympathy in characterising the relationship between the social activists and the object of her attentions.

But in spite of this, the second group of scholars, including most notably, Gareth Stedman Jones, view philanthropy and the increase of official inspection and intervention in the lives of the urban poor in the late nineteenth century, as an exchange of gifts and a means of social control. The middle-classes bestowed some of their wealth, time and culture upon the poor in the hope of the reward of peaceable behaviour in return. Put crudely, fear and not pity, is thus suggested as the basis of such activities. The work of Jacques Donzelot and Michel Foucault's writings on 'governmentality' provide another perspective akin to this. In these analyses, social action represents a technology of power, a mode of instilling the policing of the self within the (potentially disruptive) subject.¹¹ And when one comes to examine the practice of social activists, the structure of the exchange between the working-class lady and the poor bodies and homes kept firmly under her gaze, it is impossible to refuse such an interpretation – one which I explore at more length in the case studies. But the problem remains within such theoretical models that the poor or the working classes are represented as malleable objects, reshaped by the stable and fixed middle-class social activists. There is little space within such analysis for

⁹ Margaret Nevinson, *Life's Fitful Fever* (London: A & C Black, 1926) p. 79

¹⁰ Pethick-Lawrence, 1938 p. 75

¹¹ Jacques Donzelot, *The Policing of Families* (London: Hutchinson, 1979); G. Burchill, C. Gordon and P. Miller eds., *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (London: Harvester, 1991)

exploring how the agents of philanthropic action were themselves re-formed in the process of controlling, reshaping and re-moralising the poor.

Kidd himself ultimately argues for the adaptation of new theories of reciprocity from neighbouring disciplines in order to theorise the history of philanthropy. He asserts ‘that a reward is received for an other regarding act and may be the ultimate motivation for the act is not to oppose “egoism” to “altruism” but to propose that neither is a satisfactory model of social action’.¹² Kidd’s approach is evidently a structuralist one, which seeks to explain the phenomenon of giving behaviour and outline its broad social functions: a very valuable project, but one very different from the concerns of this thesis.

My overall analysis may concur with the rather functionalist understanding of social action as a surveillance relationship, but the particular object of this chapter and the case studies that follow is to think about the role of this social action in re-shaping female identities through the cross-class relationship: to think of this as a discursive re-fashioning, whereby contemporary public pronouncements concerning the nature of women’s roles in social action inflected the practice and understandings of the women who undertook such work. It is precisely in this way that those terms Kidd rejects, egoism and altruism, become objects of inquiry in their own right. For the two concepts form the moral poles of the representation of the subject and virtue in the later nineteenth century. As duty and altruism were the concepts that women social activists deployed in justifying and understanding themselves and reflecting upon their work, a study of the meaning of such terms in the nineteenth century is necessary for the exploration of subject formation.¹³ However ‘ill-defined’ the altruistic gestures that Margaret Nevinson and other female

¹² Kidd, 1996 p. 186

¹³ I hope this goes some way towards answering Alan Kidd’s call for those historians of philanthropy who use a model of ‘kindness’ and altruism to become as intellectually self reflecting as those who have used a model of social control have had to become.

social activists offered seemed in retrospect, they invoked distinct frameworks of the subject's relation to the social.

i. Bodies, Duties and the Humanitarian Narrative

The familial tradition of service to others, of a sense of duty to the social passed on from generation to generation is the strongest abiding motif in the memoirs of women social activists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Looking back over their working lives, these women invariably represented this sense of duty as their motive in taking up various forms of social action: a motive which they felt little need to explain. A career in social work or social reform is frequently represented not so much as an active choice, but as the continuation of familial traditions of service, a duty inherited from the individual's mother in particular.¹⁴ The factory inspector Hilda Martindale, for example, recounted 'my mother threw herself into public work of different kinds. The Women's Liberal Association, the Women's Co-operative Movement, the British and Foreign Bible Society'. And after deciding that her older daughter, Louisa would practice medicine, 'it was in the direction of social service that my mother decided my vocation lay, not as a hobby but as a profession'.¹⁵

Dame Agnes Hunt placed her mother Florence Marianne Hunt, a Poor Law Guardian and prop of the Hammersmith Charity Organisation Society, in a similarly pivotal role in her own career as a Queen's Jubilee Nurse.

It must be remembered that in the nineteenth century daughters of the upper middle-class were not supposed to go out into the

¹⁴ The attribution of this particular influence to individual's mothers is not one limited to women social activists. Clement Atlee's memoirs provide a remarkably similar narrative of the whys and wherefores of his involvement in East End philanthropy in the early twentieth century, see *As it Happened* (London: Heinemann, 1954) pp. 19-22.

¹⁵ Hilda Martindale, *From One Generation to Another, 1839-1944: A Book of Memories* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1944) pp. 32, 42. For further examples of the invocation of familial traditions of social service see Furse, *Hearts and Pomegranates*, pp. v-vi, 156; Webb, *My Apprenticeship*, pp.150-1

world to earn their own living...Mother, however, was a law unto herself, and I well remember the stinging lecture she gave my unfortunate sister Jeanne...The lecture ended with these words: 'You will, during the next nine months, decide which profession you wish to take up and, if you have not decided when you return, I shall have you trained as a cook. I refuse to have any daughter of mine sitting around with her mouth open, waiting to be married.'¹⁶

As Hunt's recollections suggest, this overwhelming sense of duty overcame the conventional expectation of leisured inactivity as the lot of the daughters of the upper middle-class. The moral necessity of work was wielded as a way of displacing the anxiety that somehow such activities made middle-class women less respectable. As Pethick-Lawrence indicated in her memoirs, making something of oneself and of one's life through work was figured as a duty within certain sectors of the middle-class; a duty that was as apparent for daughters as for sons. It was not sufficient to exist for oneself. It was also necessary to act for others and to shape one's identity around the perceived needs of others. To do other than one's duty was to lapse into selfishness. This was the basis of the dominant culture of altruism.

The anxieties surrounding the idea of selfishness in the late nineteenth century make it clear that the concept itself implied something far more serious than the minor peccadillo of today. Seen not only as a minor sin, but also the sin of minors now, selfishness suggests a childish disregard for the unfortunate practical necessities of life in a crowded world, a disinclination to acknowledge the claims of others and a stubborn (if understandable) resistance to moving beyond the ego. And perhaps this tolerant attitude is the only one possible in a culture saturated by Freudian understandings of the self and

¹⁶ Dame Agnes Hunt, *This is My Life* (London: Blackie, 1938) p. 81. Mrs F M Hunt's own work within the Hammersmith and Fulham C.O.S., and her fearsome reputation, receives analysis in its own right in Chapter 6, see below pp. 204-206.

identity. But of course it follows that the structures through which the self, and hence selfishness, were understood in the previous century were quite different.

Although, as I suggested earlier, the dominant tenor of social and political thought could be characterised as individualist as opposed to collectivist, such theories did not celebrate the role of the autonomous self as the antithesis of society. The liberal idea of the social in the later nineteenth century was predicated on the existence of certain characteristics in its individual members; characteristics that were fundamentally other-regarding in their nature. Duty, altruism, self-control, responsibility and even – strange as it sounds – those mainstays of moral character, independence and self-reliance, were all part of this ideal social self, which focussed outwards upon the individual's obligations to others. The cultivation of these moral virtues was imagined as necessary to and nurtured by a society that minimised state intervention in the field of social welfare. In this context, selfishness was never viewed as a mere lapse in concentration, but as the seed of spiritual decay and social anomie. With the positive expressions of self-hood outlined above so thickly imbricated with one's relations with others, selfishness was not a case of self-affirmation but rather one of self-annihilation.

In his essay 'The Culture of Altruism: Selfishness and the Decay of Motive', Stefan Collini outlines an ideal-type of dominant Victorian morality, and goes on to argue that within this, morality could be chiefly characterised as a 'system of obligations in which... /only an obligation could beat an obligation'.¹⁷ As a consequence of this dominant conceptualisation of morality the category of 'duty' extended very widely; the whole of humanity represented the others whose welfare was one's duty over and above selfish interests. Collini uses this observation as grounds for asserting the significance of

¹⁷ Stefan Collini, 'The Culture of Altruism: Selfishness and the Decay of Motive' in *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850-1930* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991) p. 63

altruism in nineteenth-century social and political thought, balancing present day representations that have tended to emphasise the heritage of Utilitarianism as individualistic, rational and calculating. At the heart of his argument, and indeed of this chapter too, is a concern to emphasise the ever-present fear of selfish action in the works of the 'Public Moralists' of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; 'The characterisation of the alternative to performing one's duties stressed giving into temptation or being seduced by one's inclinations, and these inclinations were regarded as inherently selfish'.¹⁸ To be moral in terms of dominant late nineteenth-century discourse, involved the performance of disinterested duty and the active disregard for personal inclinations or self interested outcomes.

Due to the writers he selects for his study, Collini's work does not address the differing inflections of this dominant moral framework in the light of gender difference. The relationship between nineteenth-century understandings of 'duty', 'obligation' and 'selfishness' and ideas of gender therefore still remains unexplored. What I want to suggest here is that the writings of social activists in the late nineteenth century were sites of discursive struggles to redefine middle-class women's duties: sites where earlier notions of the primacy of women's duty to fathers, husbands or a similarly patriarchal God were contested and displaced. One alternative model that was available, and I would argue quite distinct from women's familial duty, was a structure of perfect social obligation. The representation of such broad obligations, as I shall illustrate, involved the *a priori* assumption of middle-class women's part as active partners in the social system;

¹⁸ Collini, 1991 p. 63

they were citizens with an obligation, a positive right, to amend the lives of the less fortunate.¹⁹

In order to explore the changing concept of duty in relation to the female subject further, I want to start by examining the representation of the philanthropic impulse in the biographies, autobiographies and memoirs of women who came to public prominence through their social reform work prior to the period of this study. There is a clear representational tradition at work if one examines the written lives of the handful of women social reformers whose activities still seem to guarantee them a place in heroic individualist accounts of the nineteenth century.²⁰ The iconography of the delicate upright body of the lady, seeing terrible things, yet casting the light of sensibility and humanity around her and impelled into the process of reform, unites biographical narratives of figures as disparate as Elizabeth Fry, Louisa Twining and of course, Florence Nightingale.²¹

In such representations of the life and work of women reformers the motif of being the chosen instrument of divine love is a recurrent one. In his memoir of Elizabeth Fry, for example, Charles Gordelier recounts Fry's reaction to the prophesy of a prominent Friend of 'the high and important calling she would be led into'.

From that day, her love of pleasure and the world was gone...the way of religion chosen...and from that time most steadily, though gently, did she continue to advance in the path which she believed it to be her duty henceforth to walk.²²

¹⁹ On this distinction between duty and obligation Mill summarises as follows; 'duties of perfect obligation are those duties in virtue of which a correlative *right* resides in some person or persons; duties of imperfect obligation are those moral obligations which do not give birth to any right'. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 51, emphasis in original.

²⁰ See for example Nancy Boyd, *Josephine Butler, Octavia Hill and Florence Nightingale: Three Victorian Women Who Changed Their World* (London: Macmillan, 1982)

²¹ See Mrs Francis Cresswell, *A Memoir of Elizabeth Fry by her Daughter* (London: Piper, Stephenson and Spence, 1856); Louisa Twining, *Recollections of Workhouse Visiting and Management During Twenty-Five Years* (London: Kegan Paul, 1880)

²² Charles Gordelier, *A Lecture on the Public Life and Character of Elizabeth Fry* (London: Ward, 1862) p.

Lit by the inner flame of spiritual calling these pioneer women reformers entered the dark places, disclosing the depravity and abuse to which others had previously been blind.

Mrs Fry entered [Newgate] accompanied only by one lady...the sorrowful and neglected condition of these depraved women and their miserable children dwelling in such a vortex of corruption deeply sank into her heart...Mrs Fry had formed the resolution of entering upon this work of mercy, ignorant indeed, of very much of the depravity and loathsomeness she found in the place...but she remained firm in her benevolent purpose. She spoke to the inmates, in the language of peace and afforded a glimmering of hope.²³

The light cast by these women was figured as the tool of awakening conscience, not so much in the benighted objects of their reform, but rather in the souls of all who had previously allowed such abuses to exist.

Josephine Butler, I would suggest, was the last female reformer to be represented in this tradition. In memoirs, biographies and even contemporary iconography she appeared as the culmination and chronological end point of this discursive construction of the female, humanitarian subject. Such representations were part of the narrative by which the invisible was made visible; the means through which those previously outside the fold of humanitarian concern and spiritual rescue were brought within. In her efforts to represent women prostitutes as worthy objects of pity and duty, Butler attempted to animate the most socially outcast of groups in this way. In her short memoir of Butler, Mary Priestman described her as 'one whom we could follow in the dark path we had entered on... slight [and] graceful...she raised her eyes with such a look of inexpressible sadness, as if the weight of the world's sins & sorrows rested on her innocent head'. Priestman further represented Butler as 'a woman Christ to save us from our despair'.²⁴ She came to

²³ Gordelier, 1862, p. 16

²⁴ Priestman cit. Walkowitz, 1980, p. 114

personify the body of Christ, suffering pain and abuse out of pity for fallen women and in order to bring them redemption. Although historians have noted the extraordinary level of personal adulation that Butler received, Priestman's figuring of her leader as a martyr missionary possessed by the divine spirit and sharing in the world's woes is not quite as disruptive as it might seem.²⁵

The Evangelical narrative that empowered women to act as divine proxies in reforming social wrongs, was a common motif in the writings of female social reformers throughout the first half of the nineteenth century.²⁶ In this understanding, duty was not mapped directly onto groups of the poor and needy, but rather envisaged as a direct connection between the philanthropist and her God. The more direct and intimate this connection was represented as being, the more unanswerable appeared the woman's work. In constructing fresh areas of duties for middle-class women, and in advancing their own work, reformers could draw upon a traditional Protestant discourse of the virtues of self sacrifice and the 'folly and vanity of a life of self-indulgence and worldly dissipation'. In asking for the help of 'young ladies of our religious families' in her *London Bible Women's Mission* in 1857, Ellen Ranyard argued,

Unencumbered by domestic cares, with leisure at their command, furnished with scriptural knowledge, and possessing ability to impart it, do not obligations rest upon them to promote the welfare of the poor and ignorant, which the Great Master does not impose on the large body of their poorer sisters who are called upon to labour for their daily bread?²⁷

²⁵ Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) pp. 113-124; Barbara Caine, *Victorian Feminists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) pp. 150-156

²⁶ Kathleen Heasman, *Evangelicals in Action: An Appraisal of their Social Work in the Victorian Era* (London: Bles, 1962); for an appraisal of the profound impact of evangelicalism on 'secular' thought see Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795-1865* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988)

²⁷ L.N.R [Ellen Ranyard], *The Book and its Missions: Past and Present*, Vol. 2 (London: W Kent, 1857) p. 232

It is clear from Ranyard's writings that she perceived the call of duty to come, quite literally, from above, rather than from the bodies and souls of the poor, below. She figured the obligation of reform and philanthropy as the connection between the disparate nodes of ladies, God and poor women. Middle-class women's duty in this respect was to God, and the enactment of it brought them closer to him. Priestman's representation of Butler as a female Christ figure suggests the extension of this earlier Evangelical model and not some rupturing heretical feminist theology.

In publicising their work, prominent female philanthropic reformers of the nineteenth century relied upon the techniques of what Thomas Laqueur has characterised as 'the humanitarian narrative'.²⁸ Describing the inmates of prisons, workhouses, camp hospitals or Lock Hospitals, these social activists used that 'cultural propensity to use detailed description of the body as a common locus of understanding and sensibility'.²⁹ In amassing detail, compiling minute observations about people who had previously been beneath public concern and notice these reformers used the 'building blocks of the "reality effect", ...the literary technique through which the experiences of others are represented as real'.³⁰ As Laqueur indicates, the humanitarian narrative constructed a connection between 'an evil, a victim and a benefactor' through textualising the body 'as the common bond between those who suffer and those who would help'. Given the importance of this rhetoric of sensibility it is therefore not that surprising that Butler's admirers and co-workers saw her as embodying the 'weight of the world's sins and sorrows'. Her mission was to construct the connection between the body of the prostitute woman and her upper middle-class female saviour, binding the two together with the

²⁸ Thomas Laqueur, 'Bodies, Details and the Humanitarian Narrative' in Lynn Hunt ed. *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) pp. 177-204

²⁹ *ibid.* p. 201

³⁰ *ibid.* p. 177

language of feeling and forcing a sense of ownership and responsibility for this assaulted, afflicted body onto the public.

The iconography of the sensible, suffering body of the upper middle-class female pioneer activist was therefore one mode of making the previously unseen visible. But once perceived, the bodies of the suffering – prisoners, elderly workhouse inmates, soldiers, prostitutes – entered the realm of duty. The humanitarian narrative, with its central point of the ultra sensible, all-perceiving body of the female reformer, found its success and termination in the performance of duty by the middle-classes, in the enactment of obligation through legal reform, government inquiries and widespread philanthropic endeavours. The narrative structure of biographies of these pioneer female reformers echo this transition from sensibility to duty. They came, they saw, they felt with and they acted out their sense of duty – and of course made it appear to be a duty for all. Once a wrong was perceived, the seeing subject had no choice but to make over her life to the righting of this injustice. Yet such narratives of suffering sensibility, the centrepiece of Laqueur's definition of the 'humanitarian narrative' were in decline by the 1870s. The suffering were all too visible, and new theoretical models were employed to represent the containment and cure of these characters through the dutiful work of the female social activist.

ii. The Transformation of Duty: Social Theory and the Female Reformer in London, 1870-1906

The self-presentation and biographical representation of female social reformers during the mid-nineteenth century, as impelled by divine inspiration and a personal sense of duty to go beyond the bounds of acceptable norms of feminine behaviour, provided a familiar

narrative of the pioneer. They were the voices crying in the wilderness, the suffering sensible feminine Christ figures, driven by a sense of duty to risk personal martyrdom for mass redemption. But in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, social work or social reform, even if adopted as a profession, could no longer be framed as a self-immolating choice, a dramatic reshaping of the female subject driven by divine inspiration. In a letter to Henrietta Barnett as early as 1873, Octavia Hill appeared to regret the passing of this heroic model of missionary activity.

My memory of work among the poor as I remember it was so different, the pioneers of the movement now so popular had such lonely work, sacrificed so much, met with so much obloquoy [sic], our actions seem to me cheap in comparison with theirs, - & yet I think they must all look down with joyful sympathy to see the gradual growth of care for what they prized so much.³¹

Hill was correct in her estimation that the era of the martyr-pioneer had passed. Although Hill, Henrietta Barnett and Helen Bosanquet, among others, achieved a political platform for their views and public recognition of their work in their own lifetimes, they were never to be memorialised in reverential popular iconography. There could no longer be the tale of lonely self-sacrifice because the enactment of duty to the poor had been transformed into a widespread sense of social obligation. As Charles Gordelier put it in his memoir of Elizabeth Fry,

The ground which was occupied by those memorable and devoted labourers...is now occupied by thousands of equally devoted servants in the cause of truth and righteousness; 'tis true, many of those may not shine so resplendently as those [that went before] in the page of future history.³²

³¹ BLPES Coll. Misc. 512 Octavia Hill to Henrietta Barnett, 16th February 1873

³² Gordelier, 1862 p. 35

The moral elevation of the subject through altruism had been fixed and accepted as a duty that pertained specifically to the urban ‘degraded’ working class.³³ And further, as a result of this extension of the realm of duty the culture of altruism was already losing its specifically feminine inflection, translating into a more heterosocial understanding of disinterested action as opposed to impassioned personal interest.

I want now to explore this transition in the subject position of the female social reformer. In order to do this it is necessary to examine what I term the transformation of duty in the last three decades of the nineteenth century. It was London that formed the chief locus of this transformation of duty as embodied in the writing of political theorists, social activists, social explorers and socialists in the last three decades of the nineteenth century. It was there that what Collini perceives as the ‘feature that became more common in the 1880s and 1890s, namely the explicit concentration upon the duties of altruism to those below one in the social scale’ was at its most obvious.³⁴ London disclosed the degenerating bodies and characters of its slum dwellers to the gaze of social investigators and journalists, who in turn published their visions and called for further inquiry.³⁵ And the call of duty was seen to emanate from these bodies, from this part of the social body in and of itself.

Increasingly, the subject’s obligation was figured not as a divine requirement, but as a duty to the social, to the race or to the Empire. Beatrice Webb reflected upon her involvement in rent collecting in the East End of London in the mid 1880s as the result of

³³ This particular term for the objects of philanthropic intervention comes from Henrietta Barnett, ‘Passionless Reformers’ in Samuel and Henrietta Barnett, *Practicable Socialism: Essays on Social Reform* (London: Longmans, 1888; 2nd ed. 1894) pp. 88-98 (p. 89)

³⁴ Collini, 1991, p. 83

³⁵ Of particular note in this location of duty upon the London poor are Andrew Mearns, *The Bitter Cry of Oucastr London* (1883 repr. Bath: Chivers, 1969); William Booth, *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (London: Salvation Army, 1890). The work of the novel in effecting this shift was also highly significant, as Pethick-Lawrence’s reaction to Besant’s *The Children of Gibeon* suggests, see also; Arthur Morrison, *A Child of the Jago* (1896); George Gissing, *The Nether World* (1889) and *Thyrza* (1887); John Law [Margaret Harkness] *A City Girl* (1887); *Out of Work* (1888).

her being seized by the 'time spirit' of the decade, the two idols of the mid-Victorian era. Webb identified these as the belief in science 'by which all mundane problems would be solved' and 'the consciousness of a new motive; the transference of the emotion of self sacrificing service from God to man'.³⁶ This secularisation of duty and its institutionalisation and codification as a system of obligation between the 'educated classes' and the 'residuum' had profound effects upon the place of the female reformer. The discourse of duty evolved from a concern with bodies and souls to focus on character and self-discipline; from the feminine invocation of the transformational power of sensibility and sympathy to a notion of reciprocal obligation and wise government sustained by a logic of class difference.

In order to provide some background to the later case studies and to examine the meaning of duty in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I will now explore this aspect of obligation in the social theories deployed by Octavia Hill, women workers in the London Charity Organisation Society and by women civil servants. In selecting this material for my case studies I am aware that my reading appears to be one of gradual evolution and broad consensus between women social activists. Of course, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did witness challenges to these structures of understanding, for example in the work of socialist women reformers, writing in the *Clarion* newspaper and elsewhere. And again, even in London, the work of explicitly sectarian organisations, such as the Society of St Vincent de Paul, Protestant sisterhoods or the Jewish Board of Guardians offered alternative models of duty and social reformation.

³⁶ Beatrice Webb, *My Apprenticeship* (London: Longmans, 1926) p. 112

I will explore the (often fraught) interaction between women workers in such organisations and the C.O.S. in Chapter Six. But I maintain that in London the social theorists and practitioners in the network that enclosed the C.O.S., Octavia Hill's housing management schemes, Toynbee Hall and the Women's University and Lady Margaret Hall Settlements, were predominant during the period in question here. The emphasis on self-help, individualism and the moral roots of pauperism propounded by the C.O.S. in particular articulated the dominant discourse of social intervention in London in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Even those who seceded from the organisation tended to define their new creeds in opposition to the philosophy of the C.O.S., accepting its status even in the moment of dismissing it.³⁷

Octavia Hill came to public prominence through her work and writings on housing management in the early 1870s. Her philosophy of urban reform and regeneration has been well documented by recent scholars and involved the deployment of middle-class ladies to act as rent collectors and effect gradual moral improvement in tenements and slum courts. Hill's theories of middle-class women's place in, and duty to, social action marked a transition between the specifically Christian redemptive ethos of earlier workers and the more secular, investigative scientific approach of social activists of the 1880s and 1890s.

As I mentioned briefly in the last chapter, Hill's imagining of the process of reformation brought about by the rent collector relied upon the action of the sensible, refined body of the lady. The demeanour of the lady acted as an exemplar and the site of

³⁷ Of particular note for this are Beatrice Webb (see *My Apprenticeship* pp. 169-178) and Henrietta and Samuel Barnett, who, despite secession from the COS in 1886, mingled criticism of 'indiscriminate almsgiving' with demands that 'a national want must be met by a national effort' (*Practicable Socialism*, 1888, p. 28).

re-moralisation, calling forth 'love' and bringing about environmental improvement through a process of osmosis.

It is...the fact that [the tenants] do not like those whom they have learned to love, and whose standard is higher than their own, to see things which would grieve them, which has enabled us to accomplish nearly every reform of outward things that we have achieved; so that the surest way to have a place kept clean is to go through it often oneself.³⁸

It was the corporeal presence of the lady rent collector which brought light to dark places, whitewash and distemper to slum courts, order from disorder. Her presence and 'personal influence' brought into being a sense of duty and therefore a process of regeneration.

If Hill's writings are read against the humanitarian narratives of earlier female reformers, it is clear that despite some apparent similarities a very interesting and profound shift has taken place. For the aim of calling forth a sense of duty, of love and care was still present in Hill's work, and the sensible body of the rent collector was figured as the means of making existing conditions unacceptable. But the subject of such an awakening of conscience was not the complacent middle-classes, but instead the poor themselves. It was the 'residuum', the degraded poor slum dwellers, who had to be enlightened into their duties by the sensibility of the lady. In Hill's writings, the damaged, disruptive bodies of the poor are no longer deployed in the textual construction of a reality effect, and as the signifiers of the demand of outraged conscience for intervention, but rather the poor appear as characters to be stimulated into full social subjectivity.

The duty of the lady rent collector was to create a sense of obligation in her tenants, interpolating them into a cohesive and reciprocal social organism. Rent collecting according to Hill was a way of 'meeting the poor on the grounds where they have duties

³⁸ Octavia Hill, 'Blank Court: Or, Landlords and Tenants' *Macmillan's Magazine* 24 (1871) 456-65 (p. 460)

you' and gave the lady rent collector the opportunity to 'speak gently and simply of the blessedness' of such duties as the means of individual redemption.³⁹ The poor too, had to enter into the culture of self-abnegation before the claims of others. They had to learn their duty to keep home and family clean, tidy and respectable, before Hill's workers would sanction repairs and renovations in an act of reciprocation. The tenants had to practice self-denial and thrift, before they found themselves worthy of recommendation for aid to send their children away for holidays or convalescence, or loans to fund the purchase of tools. The elevation of character in Hill's project lay in the entry of the subject into this social world in which the claims of others always had to come first – a process of rebirth which was gestated by duty made flesh, the lady rent collector.

Where Hill connected most strongly with the Idealist social theorists who, with her, went on to have such a great influence within the Charity Organisation Society was in this contemplation of the idea of duty.⁴⁰ Fundamental to Hill's beliefs in the efficacy of rent-collecting as a means of social regeneration was what she termed this terrain of 'mutual duty'. For Hill, the middle and upper classes' prevalent sense of duty towards the London poor was only too obviously visible in the unthinking habit of 'indiscriminate alms giving'. Such randomly dispensed charity encouraged improvidence, deception and the moral decay of pauperism in the recipient, whilst it assuaged the conscience of the

³⁹ Octavia Hill, 'The Work of Volunteers in the Organisation of Charity' *Macmillan's Magazine* 26 (1872) 441-449 (p. 445)

⁴⁰ For the significance of philosophical Idealism and the influence of the thought of T. H. Green upon social work in London in the late nineteenth century see, Melvin Richter, *The Politics of Conscience: T H Green and his Age* (London: Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1964); A M McBriar, *An Edwardian Mixed Double: The Bosanquets versus the Webbs. A Study in British Social Policy, 1890-1929* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987). It is however, worth noting Collini's caveat concerning the causal relationship often posited between Green's philosophy and the dominant culture of altruism in the late nineteenth century. 'Those historians who have tried to see the 'rise of collectivism' or the dominance of the idea of 'duty' in the English administrative class in terms of the influence of Green's philosophy are guilty of that misplaced individualism that is an occupational hazard of a certain kind of history of ideas. We need to approach the question from the other end and to recognize that Green theorized more fully and consistently than anyone else the assumptions of anti-selfish sensibility: it was because these assumptions were so widespread that his philosophy enjoyed the success it did, and not vice-versa.' Collini, 1991 p. 83

donor; it was the lip service of altruism. What she sought to restore in her system of housing management was a form of service for her volunteers, 'work where duty was continuous and distinct, and where it was mutual'.⁴¹ I analyse the specificity of rent collecting and the legal obligation of the tenants to pay the lady collectors – a key aspect of their duty – in Chapter Five, but the general implications of this 'mutual duty' and the idea of service calls for some investigation in the context of this chapter.

The concept of service was the one most frequently invoked by writers of the 1870s and early 1880s when referring to those educated men and women who chose to live and work amongst the poor of the East End. In contemporary understandings, service meant the giving over of the self, self-interest and the personal ties and status of kin to the perceived needs of slum dwellers. In return for what was constructed as an abandonment of self and the interests of class status, reformers expected a reciprocal abnegation of the supposedly local and partial class based interests of the urban working classes. As many of the historians of social reform in late nineteenth-century London have indicated, the well known activists behind the projects of Toynbee Hall and other philanthropic settlements sought quite explicitly to restore an element of feudal relations – an 'urban squirearchy' – to the almost exclusively working-class districts of the East End and South London.⁴² They aimed at building personal ties of obligation across the divide of class as a result of sharing the Arnoldian project of culture. Beatrice Webb cites Arnold Toynbee as addressing his working-class audience in the 1880s with the following, rather apocalyptic statement; 'If you will only keep to the love of your fellow men and to great ideals, then

⁴¹ Octavia Hill, *Letter to My Fellow Workers*, (London: Houseboy-Brigade, 1880) p. 2

⁴² Stedman Jones, 1971; McBriar 1987; Standish Meachum, *Toynbee Hall and Social Reform, 1880-1914: The Search for Community* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); Deborah Weiner studies how this vision of a rural utopia of feudal relations was embodied in the very architecture of the university settlements and other philanthropic edifices in London, see *Architecture and Social Reform in Late Victorian London* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994).

we shall find our happiness in helping you, but if you do not, then our reparation will have been in vain'.⁴³ And this culture of service provided a conceptualisation of the subject in the social in which the conventionally feminine attributes of self-abnegation, altruism and sacrifice were celebrated as the highest Idealist goal for both men and women of conscience.

The emphasis upon 'personal influence' was a key part of the idea of service to the urban poor in the late nineteenth century. Writers on social reform, with Hill prominent among them, urged readers not to up their charitable donations, but to volunteer as visitors, giving away not alms, but the supposedly untainted gift of themselves; to exert their beneficent influence and interest on behalf of their chosen slice of the London poor.⁴⁴ This relationship was the foundation of mutual duty: writers imagined a personal tie, an element of reciprocation in which the service of the educated woman (for as many writers pointed out, to talk of volunteers *was* usually to talk of women) elicited a sense of duty in the recipient; a duty to listen, learn and remodel their lives. Women social activists were given a specific place within this theory of personal service as educators to conduct the poor into full and active membership of the social body.

I want to argue that the newly discovered and constructed needs of the urban 'residuum' in London from the early 1880s, provided middle-class women with that necessary 'obligation to beat an obligation', which Collini gives as the only escape clause of dominant Victorian morality. Given the existence of a degree of liberty, middle-class

⁴³ Webb, *Apprenticeship*, p. 183. It is this notion of exchange that is key to Stedman Jones' analysis of the 'deformation of the gift' in *Outcast London*.

⁴⁴ The early publications of the C.O.S. witness a tension between articles by Octavia Hill and other (generally female) contributors, mourning the passing away of the personal element, and the organisation's insistence that benevolent individuals give away tickets with the address of the C.O.S. District Office on them instead of indiscriminate alms. The compromise was that volunteers were encouraged to administer pensions and ongoing charitable relief through personal visits, whilst making it clear that the money came from the Committee, and all they brought to the 'case' was themselves.

women could figure their obligation to aid the urban poor as one of more urgency than the claims of family and household. It could be understood, justified, as the disinterested performance of duty to others, through which both independence and conformity to the dominant discourse of morality could be achieved precisely because fulfilment came about through the service of others. Social action negotiated the tension between the anathema of female selfishness identified with the search for self-determination and the annihilation of self-abnegation before the claims of family duties. The city slums as a space of duty for middle-class women gave them freedom.

By the early 1890s however, these service based theories of social reform and the particular demand for specifically feminine characteristics in order to bring about such social changes were modified by the ideas of a younger generation. In her history of social work in London, Helen Bosanquet cited the annual report of the C.O.S. for 1899-1900 to illustrate the passing away of this idea of personal service:

There is contraction of interest in personal and voluntary work. Relief, not charity, dominates the position. Societies for the care of young women and servants find it more and more difficult to obtain the help of volunteers... There is not the same demand for admission to the settlements. The thought of a younger generation of the middle class is turned to new problems. In part, but only to a small extent, are its members active in poor law or municipal work. Those who have a professional interest study its conditions more closely, but the number of students and workers who are attracted to it with a view to personal and voluntary service is less.⁴⁵

The study of a system had displaced the role of personal service, and professional interest had usurped the sentiments of individuated duty. In her study of the changing meanings and effects of women's involvement in 'the work of benevolence' in the nineteenth century United States, Lori Ginzberg has demonstrated the impact of such work on

⁴⁵ Helen Bosanquet, *Social Work in London, 1869-1912* (London: John Murray, 1914; repr. Sussex: Harvester, 1973) p. 87

cultures of class and gender. She suggests that over the nineteenth century 'reformers adapted the work of benevolence to an increasingly class-stratified and class conscious society' and 'refashioned the ideology of benevolence itself from an analysis of gender to one of class'.⁴⁶ Ginzberg specifically highlights the role of the Charity Organisation Society, with its stress on science and business, in altering discourse in this way, bringing about a new 'desexualised professionalism' among women involved in social action in the 1880s. Ginzberg's analysis of the role of women's benevolent work in the formation of middle-class identity is evidently firmly bounded by the specific social location of the United States in the nineteenth century. But her attribution of a key role to the Charity Organisation Society in the de-feminisation and professionalisation of women's involvement in social action and the consequent alteration of the discourse of benevolence and altruism in itself holds true just as well in the context of the London parent branch of this organisation.

Despite practical failings, in regard to its aims of abolishing out relief and co-ordinating all charitable relief throughout the capital, the social theorists at the heart of the C.O.S. were extremely successful in capturing the high ground of debate on the nature of social obligation, the enactment of altruism and the practice of social reform. The lengthy and complex process of investigation of applicants which C.O.S. policy stipulated became a benchmark of thoroughness and the key way in which workers for this organisation could represent themselves as the rational, professional experts in the field of social action. The duty of the female worker for the C.O.S. was not to aid the poor applicant, but to apply her training, her expert judgement and her local knowledge in assuring that the 'case' was put in a position of full independence for the rest of their future life. Duty

⁴⁶ Lori D Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics and Class in the Nineteenth Century United States* (Amherst: Yale University Press, 1990) p. 5

lay not in the bodies and souls of the poor, but in a cohesive vision of the social and in the adherence to a quasi-scientific model designed to bring this vision into being.

The secretaries of the London district offices, increasing numbers of whom were female and salaried as the century drew to a close, sought to use these markers of professionalism to distinguish themselves from other women involved in philanthropic action. Miss Pickton, secretary of the Paddington District Committee admitted that she and her fellow workers had ‘some sympathy’ with needy applicants for aid but,

...they often (probably as a protest against gush and sentimentality) try to conceal it. It is this concealment that often leads to the charge against us of hardness and red-tapism. When a District Visitor bursts into the office with a sad tale of distress, if she sees that the man or woman she sees is as sensitive as herself to the pathos of the story, but is able to keep cool, and discuss with her the practical difficulties in the way of helping, she may not always agree, but she is more likely to come again in like circumstances than if she is met with the discouraging answer that her case can only be dealt with by the Poor Law.⁴⁷

In imagining encounters in the District Office in this way, Pickton defined herself and other C.O.S. ‘professional’ social workers against the misdirected enthusiasm and sentimentality of the District Visitor. Those very ‘feminine’ qualities of sympathy sensibility and personal interest that had long been pictured as a necessary part of philanthropic action, were here quite explicitly downgraded and transferred onto the amateurish figure of the District Visitor.⁴⁸ Whereas the District Visitor is clearly gendered as female in Pickton’s description, the calm and rational C.O.S. worker inhabits a heterosocial role and space; the C.O.S. worker would apply the same ‘scientific’ process of adjudication whether ‘man or woman’. This conscious rejection of the tradition of

⁴⁷ Miss Pickton, *The Work of the District Committees*, (C.O.S. Occasional Paper 58, 1896)

⁴⁸ J. Donajgrodzki ed., *Social Control in Nineteenth Century Britain* (London: Croom Helm, 1977) p. 23 argues that during the 1880s and 1890s ‘the meaning of personal influence underwent a change’ as moral order came to be increasingly enforced by professional institutions. ‘Impersonality, equated with impartiality, became a virtue; ‘influence’, the distinction between its legitimate and illegitimate forms forgotten, came to be regarded as a form of corruption’.

feminine sensibility in Pickton's writings is a pattern that can be seen to repeat itself over and over again in the discourse of social action from the early 1890s. With the increased belief in a 'scientific' solution to the problems of poverty and pauperism, with the new techniques of the social investigation and the development of training schemes for social workers in the capital, social action came to be seen as a realm for the genderless professional.

The professional ideal is one that is intimately connected to belief in a meritocratic society and the possibility of disinterested action. Given this structure of understanding, the professional attains her or his status as a result of skills that society acknowledges and rewards, and these skills are then deployed for the general good of society with impartiality and an absence of self interest. It is in this context that Collini has gestured to the connection between the 'culture of altruism' and the professionalisation and proliferation of the home civil service in the late nineteenth century. Civil servants – rather obviously – were imagined as subjects in selfless service to the well being of civil society. The dominant moral sensibility of altruism thus helped to legitimate the expansion of the home civil service, among other professions. But this very language of impartiality, even-handedness and disinterest suggests another important element in the evolution of duty in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

For this professional ideology was also applied to the work of the first senior women civil servants, appointed as factory inspectors. And it embodied an image of purely civic obligation. The social sphere of duty was inclusive and the woman inspector was obliged to be even handed in her treatment of the claims of employers and employees. She was the servant of all, not called by a personal sense of duty to the needs of a specific group. As I argue in Chapter Seven, the first women inspectors struggled

with this new understanding of duty and clung to the idea that their particular obligation was rather to the bodies and characters of women factory workers.⁴⁹ For this older conceptualisation of duty was the strongest argument that they possessed for the defence of the continued autonomy and independence of the women's branch of the factory inspectorate.

By the close of the first decade of the twentieth century a younger generation of women factory inspectors could no longer understand their senior inspectors' desire to justify their work in the terminology of particular gendered duties. This new generation of women professionals supported the idea of amalgamating their work with that of the male inspectors with no distinction of sex.⁵⁰ It was the expression of a perfect structure of civic obligation, where duty could be framed as extending smoothly and equally to cover all who had the claim to rights as subjects of civil society. But the transformative narrative of duty, a force impelling middle-class women away from the claims of family and domesticity and into the service of specific groups of others, simply had no place there. It was too interested and too partial – the theory of 'personal influence' was just too personal to sit within the discourse of professionalism. And with this demise of the importance of the 'personal element' to dominant understandings of social reformation, so too declined the celebration of the agency of femininity in effecting social transformation.

iii. The Disappearance of Duty

The extent to which the representation of the moral and spiritual aspirations of the pioneering female reformers had become unacceptable, embarrassing even, to a later

⁴⁹ See below, pp. 233-234

⁵⁰ Mary Drake McFeely, *Lady Inspectors: The Campaign for a Better Workplace, 1893-1921* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988) pp. 154-159; the departments were eventually fused in 1921.

generation is suggested in the Introduction to a new edition of Octavia Hill's writings on housing management issued in 1921 and 'Adopted to Modern Conditions'. The author firmly wrote out any potential for the narrative of the heroic female reformer driven by a sense of duty. I. G Gibbon of the Ministry of Health corrects the view held by 'a small number of the ...few who know of her work' that it represented 'an attempt to insinuate a District Visitor under the disguise of a rent collector', adding,

The aim of those who would follow in the footsteps of Octavia Hill, the Women Property Managers, is to manage property on a firm business basis, to make it pay...and to carry out the work with knowledge and experience, with sympathy and tact, and with as reasonable regard to the genuine interests of the tenants as of the owner.⁵¹

'Sympathy and tact' displace sensibility and suffering. The impersonal financial language of 'firm business', 'interest' and 'management' supersedes the individuated moral terminology of 'philanthropy', 'friendship' and 'wise government' so skilfully deployed by Hill. The rhetorical use of the feminised characteristic of sensibility, was, as I have suggested, already in decline amongst social theorists and activists by the 1880s. But what more interesting in this reframing of Hill's work is the total avoidance of the language of character, duty and obligation which was so central in the representation of social intervention in the last three decades of the nineteenth century. The work of the female housing manager in the 1920s is represented as a functional, limited task. There is no space for the invocation of the framework of duty that could figure the very presence of the lady as a vital part of a process of social transformation.

⁵¹ *House Property and its Management: Some Papers on the Methods of Management Introduced by Octavia Hill and Adapted to Modern Conditions* ed. by Edith Neville (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1921) p. 6

Duty had got itself a bad name in the early twentieth century. As Stefan Collini has indicated in his study of the pioneering sociologist, L.T. Hobhouse, the 1914-18 war and the decade that followed witnessed the strange death of not just 'Liberal England', but also of the characterisation of the social, its study and reformation, as the site of moral intervention.⁵² Hobhouse's reworking of the structures of liberal political theory into a science of society, where the spread of altruism and the extension of duty were the marks of progress, had few supporters in the post-war academy. Instead, mechanistic theories of the social as a functional organism came to form the paradigmatic basis of modern sociology. But as my foregoing analysis of the writings of social theorists and activists of just a decade earlier has suggested, it is evident that the concepts of duty, altruism and service had then formed the uncontested basis of interventions in the social.

A significant place in this writing out of duty has to be given to the work of the first generation of writers and intellectuals in the early twentieth century. By the time that women involved in social work in the late nineteenth century came to write their memoirs, Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians*, had re-configured the earlier narratives of the female pioneer reformer in such a way that 'duty' and 'mission' were figured as hypocritical Victorian values, prettifying the workings of a monstrous female ego.⁵³ Strachey's biographical essay on Florence Nightingale shattered the popular iconography of the lady with the lamp, replacing the suffering, sensible lady who acted out a personal divine mandate with a pathological, predatory creature possessed by 'a Demon'.⁵⁴ I am not

⁵² Stefan Collini, 'Conclusion: The Strange Death of Moral England', in *Liberalism and Sociology: LT Hobhouse and Political Argument in England, 1880-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (London: Constable, 1936)

⁵³ Mrs Humphry Ward published a lacerating review of Strachey's work, accusing him (unsurprisingly) of failing to comprehend the workings of the Victorian mind by representing the work of social reformers in this way, see *The Times Literary Supplement* 11th July 1918 p. 325.

⁵⁴ Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians: General Gordon, Florence Nightingale, Cardinal Manning, Dr Arnold of Rugby* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1918) p. 297

attributing a causal effect to Strachey's work alone. If one takes the larger handful of texts which were (and are still) so influential in shaping popular understandings of 'the Victorian', the high moral seriousness of the submission of the self to the demands of duty is evidently one mocked marker of the very pastness of a previous generation.⁵⁵

For too long feminist historians of the nineteenth century, drawing upon these modernist re-visions of 'the Victorian', have read 'duty' and 'obligation' either as purely negative impositions prescribed by patriarchy in order to keep women in their 'sphere', or as convenient, contingent, strategies that women deployed in escaping from it. But such an interpretation neglects the essential role that duty played in nineteenth century conceptions of the subject and society. Whether masculine or feminine, the liberal individual constituted their identity as a subject in the social body through the exercise both of rights and duties; although of course the nature of these rights and duties varied according to the inflection of gender as well as class and race. It is all too easy to forget in the light of late twentieth century political appropriations of liberal individualism, that nineteenth-century theorists such as John Stuart Mill tempered claims for the rights and liberties of the individual within a strong framework of reciprocal social obligation: a social body within which what Mill termed 'the internal sanction of duty' was the ultimate foundation of morality.⁵⁶ To talk of rights of the individual meant the inevitable imagining of duties towards others: the one simply could not exist without the other.

⁵⁵ Two early autobiographical works important in this displacement of duty are, Edmund Gosse, *Father and Son: A Study of Two Temperaments* (London: Heinemann, 1907; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983) Samuel Butler, *The Way of All Flesh* (1903 repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966) These works construct a generational divide between duty and self-abnegation (albeit in Butler's case as an example of Victorian hypocrisy) as opposed to freedom and self-expression. Peter Carey's recent reworking of the opening chapters of Gosse's autobiography in *Oscar and Lucinda* has ensured that the generational division between Victorian repression and duty and modern self-expression and freedom has been re-inscribed in popular consciousness.

⁵⁶ John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, (repr. London: JM Dent, 1993) pp. 29-30

Feminist suffrage campaigns of the late nineteenth century, deeply indebted to liberal political theory, sought not only to reshape the rights of women but also to shift the parameters of middle-class women's duties – a rounded reformation of the female subject. The discourse of feminist activists re-presented the social obligations of educated women, constructing new areas of the social body as demanding the enactment of female duty. Feminist cultural historians have provided copious and excellent analyses of the practice of new freedoms and the conceptualisation of new rights towards the turn of the century, but changes in the enactment of obligation and the idea of duty have only recently started to receive attention under the sign of 'maternalism' and gendered models of citizenship.

I now want to turn to a brief examination of how feminist writers used this idea of duty – the claims of others – as a means of advancing their political aims and the imagined 'sphere' of middle-class women's activities. I want to argue that nineteenth-century feminism relied heavily upon a rhetorical technique of speaking for others, acting as ventriloquist for the imagined needs of outcast constituencies. It was this voicing of duty that was key in connecting feminism to the developing idea of 'the social' and which formed the enduring link between the identity of the feminist movement and the practices of social action.

iv. Speaking for Others: Feminism, Women's Duties and the Rise of the Social

When the veteran feminist Frances Power Cobbe announced in 1881 that 'the straight, clear way before us – the one safe, true way of progress' for women was 'the way of DUTY', she was echoing a form of argument that had been central to feminist thought for over twenty years.⁵⁷ For the work of Anna Jameson, so central to the theory of the

⁵⁷ Frances Power Cobbe, *The Duties of Women: A Course of Lectures* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1881) p. iv

Langham Place group of feminists at the mid-century, had etched an indelible connection between feminism, duty and ‘the social’ at the heart of the British women’s movement. Jameson’s two lectures, *The Communion of Labour* and *Sisters of Charity* had a profound and long lasting influence upon feminist essayists for the two decades that followed their publication.⁵⁸ Her analysis of the lack of employment opportunities for middle-class women, her identification of the bestial ‘Minotaur’ of male sexual desires and her discussion of female emigration all served as paradigms for later writers and activists such as Josephine Butler, Jessie Boucherett and Millicent Garret Fawcett.⁵⁹

But more significantly than even these, her appeal for the ‘maternal as well as the paternal element’ to be made use of in the administration of ‘public institutions, charitable, educational and sanitary’, voiced through the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science, ensured that the philanthropic role of middle-class women was instrumental to the re-visioning of the social body from the 1860s onwards.⁶⁰ In Jameson’s writings, her argument for the need of this maternal element in projects of social reform served as a basis for the discussion of the relations between men and women of the middle-classes; her 1859 Preface contains the subheading ‘What Englishwomen Require’, to which the silent rider is inevitably ‘of men of the middle and upper classes’, as she goes on to assert the need for a wide range of social and educational reforms. And the reason why these two strands of debate meshed inextricably in Jameson’s work was that both sets of relations, those of middle-class women to the poor, and those of men and

⁵⁸ Anna Jameson, *Sisters of Charity and the Communion of Labour: Two Lectures on the Social Employment of Women* (London: Longmans, 1859)

⁵⁹ See for example the essays by Jessie Boucherett, Josephine Butler and John Boyd-Kinnear in Josephine Butler ed., *Women’s Work and Women’s Culture* (London: Macmillan, 1869)

⁶⁰ Jameson, 1859, p. xxx (prefatory letter to the Right Hon. Lord John Russell, President of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science). For the role of the NAPSS in the rise of ‘the social’ and the formation of the feminist movement see Mary Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830-1864* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) p. 4; Riley, 1988 pp. 51-5

class women in public and charitable administration. It was a favourite theme of the anti-feminists of the 1890s and 1900s to chastise suffrage activists for demanding new rights before they had truly fulfilled the duties that were their 'natural' lot. Even Frances Power Cobbe worried that progress in the cause of middle-class women would bring about 'a growth of hardness and of selfishness among women as their lives cease to be a perpetual self-oblation, and they (very properly) pursue ends of their own'.⁶⁴ But by framing new *duties* for middle-class women, ones that would inevitably bring them into a broader and more instrumental role in the social body, Jameson's rhetoric headed off precisely those charges of self-interest and the neglect of others that beset a later generation of feminists.⁶⁵

The 'enlargement of the whole sphere of duty' that Jameson called for, from the 'merely personal into the social relations' reflected a new understanding of 'the social' as a space coterminous with the others to whom the individual was bound in a relationship of obligation.⁶⁶ Personal or immediate family relations hence could be framed as the 'mere' easy first call of duty and not the primary means by which the individual came to fulfil and understand their role in society. Of course, philosophical imaginings of the social space had long sought to characterise the ideal relations of the individual and the polity, state and society. The language of contract, obligation and rights was, quite literally, an ancient discourse. But what was new in this mid nineteenth-century understanding of 'the social' was a sense of its disaggregation from the domains of the

⁶⁴ Frances Power Cobbe, 1881, p. 11

⁶⁵ For example, Eliza Lynn Linton, 'The Modern Revolt', *Macmillan's Magazine* 23 (November-April, 1871) 142-149 and repeated with some updated venom in Eliza Lynn Linton, 'The Wild Women as Politicians', *Nineteenth Century* 30 (1891) 79-88. For the continuity of such representations of suffrage activists with popular late twentieth-century understandings, we of course have to thank the musical *Mary Poppins*.

⁶⁶ Collini argues that prior to the late nineteenth-century shift to the concentration of altruism upon the poor, 'the 'others' whose welfare was the object of one's duties were co-extensive with humanity as a whole; no 'thick description' of the identity of these others was required, and the partiality involved in privileging the claims of any more restricted group tended to be castigated as another form of selfishness'. Collini, 1991, p. 64.

polity and political economy. It came to be understood as an inclusive model; one that through mere existence, all necessarily belonged to. Distinct from these other domains and in the light of this inclusiveness, the social space revealed fresh areas of concern and gave prominence to reforming agents traditionally excluded from the concerns of the polity and political economy.

This new representation of the social as an object of study, concern and intervention – as the space in which duty took definite form – has been used by historians of the social and human sciences as an explanation of such various movements from the mid-century onwards as investigative social science, social work, the expansion of the professions, in particular the home civil service, and of course the movement towards state welfare provision.⁶⁷ What I want to explore here is how this new understanding of the social (rather than the private sphere) as the space of duty altered the position of the bourgeois female subject during the later nineteenth century.

Pre- Liberal, pre-nineteenth century notions of the duty of the (female bourgeois) subject turned upon the proximity of the claimant – upon kin, dependants and neighbours, and of course the ultimate duty to one's Maker. With the rise of Liberal structures of feeling and the new conception of 'the social' as an entity, the subject came to be imagined as possessing duties towards all other potential members of this social body; enactment may have been circumscribed by proximity, but the claim of duty was not. From the mid-century onwards the work of social reformers and theorists ensured that certain groups in this social space came to be construed as in greater need, came to represent a stronger social obligation for educated women (especially single women) than any other group. The individual female subject could thus be imagined as in an

⁶⁷ See Poovey, 1995; Eileen Janes Yeo, *The Contest for Social Science: Relations and Representations of Gender and Class* (London: Rivers Oram, 1996)

instrumental and direct role with that ailing portion of the social body, 'the poor'. Within this social body, middle-class women were accorded a (relatively) uncontested position as activists – as reforming citizens of a heterosocial space. Given this summary, it should start to become clear why despite the use of the language of maternalism, housekeeping and 'separate spheres' by Jameson and so many others I want to avoid mapping an inflexible model of 'public' and 'private' on to the lives and work of women social activists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Jameson's rhetorical strategy in representing women's work with the poor and needy as an extension of their 'proper sphere' of domestic life and in opening the embrace of maternalism to enfold a newly infantilised portion of the working classes, seems to have been an effective one. As I outlined in the previous chapter, elements of this representation of women's philanthropic work still persist in recent historical accounts of such activities. And as a justification of women's involvement in local and national government and administration, such a framework was still one of the strongest lines of defence well into the early twentieth century. But I want to reassert that these were modes of representation; the female social reformer did not wander across the city streets enclosed in a spherical bubble of domesticity and maternalism that expanded to fit slum homes as she entered the door. The division of labour, or what Jameson termed the communion of labour, was a means of talking about how male and female subjects could both fulfil the duties incumbent upon them in the social body – the same social space, not one carved up into public and private. The claims of duty issued from the same quarters; what varied by gender was the nature of practice, the enactment of those obligations.

Feminist writers continued to invest in this vision of the social as a space of intervention and the true locus of duty throughout ^{the} second half of the nineteenth century.

As Denise Riley has suggested in her admirable essay on the subject,

‘the social’ offered a magnificent occasion for the rehabilitation of ‘women’. In its very founding conceptions, it was feminised; in its detail, it provided the chances for some women to enter upon the work of restoring other, more damaged women, to a newly conceived state of grace.⁶⁸

Through its engagement with the place and agency of ‘women’ Riley suggests that ‘the social’ ‘simultaneously shapes the nature and history of modern feminism’.⁶⁹ Riley herself examines the articulation of this claim for the feminisation of the social by John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor in the process of campaigning for the social and political rights of women. Quite rightly, she concludes that such arguments were ‘an effect, rather than a strategy’, a consequence of the new formulation of ‘the social’.⁷⁰

But even if not consciously and deliberately, the result of characterising middle-class women’s duties to the social as a central platform of feminism was the use of the lives and stories of very other women to frame a political narrative. Feminist rhetoric during the later nineteenth century was founded upon a mode of speaking for others, of giving voice to suffering members of the social body.

When women laying claim for women to certain privileges hitherto withheld are called self-seeking and self-asserting...it seems to be forgotten that the term ‘Women’ is a large and comprehensive one. When men nobly born and possessing advantages of wealth and education have fought battles of poor men, and claimed and wrung from Parliaments and extension of privileges enjoyed by a few to classes of their brother men who are toiling and suffering, I do not remember ever to have heard them charged with self-seeking; on the contrary, the regard that such men have had for the rights of men has been praised and deservedly so, as noble and unselfish. And why

⁶⁸ Riley, 1988 p. 48

⁶⁹ Riley, 1988 p. 51

⁷⁰ Riley, 1988 p. 46-7

should the matter be judged otherwise when the eyes of educated and thoughtful women of the better classes are opened to the terrible truth regarding the millions of their less favoured countrywomen, and they ask on *their* behalf for the redress of wrongs, and for liberty to work and live in self-reliance?⁷¹

Josephine Butler's discussion of the claims of middle-class women to rights and freedom – to their work and culture – brings us back to the dominant moral culture of altruism and the fear of selfish action discussed earlier in this chapter. The struggle for rights and self-determination could only be figured as a deplorable lapse into selfishness within the dominant moral sensibility of the later nineteenth century. By framing such claims as spoken on behalf of other 'less favoured' women these doubts could be allayed in a narrative of service.

Seeking the 'self' or political subjectivity of nineteenth-century feminism one is constantly confronted with these stories of 'others'. The desires, demands and theoretical analyses of feminists are refracted through representations of other 'women' who were never participants at the centre of activism. For at the centre was a self that refused to be self-seeking: an identity that took its shape from imagining the voices at its margins; that sketched its own outline by giving form to the darkness beyond. The concept of social service, whilst theorised as self-abnegation in the enactment of duty to others, involved the re-making of the bourgeois subject of feminism – self-formation on the basis of speaking other's stories. Such a mode of political subjectivity sits very uneasily with late twentieth-century feminism. It is antithetical in so many ways to the discourse of rights, the politicisation of personal experience and the method of consciousness raising through sharing one's own life story that shaped the subjects of second-wave feminism. In the

⁷¹ Josephine Butler, 'Introduction' to *Women's Work and Women's Culture: A Series of Essays* ed. Josephine Butler (London: Macmillan, 1869) pp. xii-xiv. Emphasis in original.

following chapter I argue that it is this opposition between late nineteenth and late twentieth-century feminist subjectivity that has led many scholars to misread the place of middle-class women in the city during the period in question.

[4]

Mapping London: Urban Identity and the ‘Not-So-New’ Women Social Activists, 1870-1914

During the last decade, feminist cultural and literary critics have come to attach a specific set of political meanings to the metropolis in the 1880s and 1890s. Through the work of such writers as Deborah Nord, Judith Walkowitz and Lynda Nead the imaginary geography of late nineteenth century London has come to be seen as a necessary part of the discursive evolution of gender identities, the city a sexualised territory of public and private, dark and light, danger and safety.¹ Contemporary accounts of women’s presence in the streets, on public transport, in settlements, boarding or lodging houses have been read as the textual markers of the arrival of what is now rather amorphously termed the ‘New Woman’, a label encompassing a variety of challenges to high Victorian notions of middle-class femininity. The city, its supposedly new female explorers and what one critic has termed the ‘sexual anarchy’ of the late nineteenth century have been mapped onto one another as the sign of the dawn of high modernity, the age of the New Woman; an age which cultural historians extend over the last two decades of the nineteenth century.²

¹ Deborah Epstein Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation and the City* (London: Cornell University Press, 1995); Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (London: Virago, 1992); Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988)

² Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*, (London: Virago, 1992). The presence of ‘respectable’ women on the streets was not a sudden sexual challenge and contest emergent in the 1880s as the works of Walkowitz and Nord have inadvertently suggested. The division of urban space into public and private, masculine and feminine was always more of rhetorical tool than a quantitative reality. Certainly, the 1880s witnessed a new level of anxiety about the movement of women on the streets, but they had always been there for one reason or another.

But I want to argue that the term ‘New Woman’ was something quite specific during its time – a mainly literary construct first used in 1894 and judged out of date by the end of the decade.³ And further, it was a label that many women who actually transgressed these imagined boundary lines of the cityscape sought to distance themselves from. For the term New Woman had not only a specifically sexual content, embodying as it did a critique of marriage and bourgeois sexual relations, but also it represented a radical break with the discourse of duty, self sacrifice and altruism so deeply imbricated in nineteenth century constructions of bourgeois femininity.

What I intend to analyse in this chapter and the case studies that follow are narratives of middle-class women’s identity in the late-nineteenth century city that have a far greater sense of continuity than rupture. London functions in this argument as a place of work, not of licensed adventure, as a map of journeys and of a way of life which was about class difference, not about gender alone. It is my argument that using the specific example of middle-class women involved in social action thus forces a reconsideration of recent arguments concerning gender and the city in the late nineteenth century. Nord and Walkowitz, among others, have noted the importance of middle-class women’s involvement in projects of social reform in the creation of the ‘contested terrain’; the challenge to the privileged upper class male gaze, of *fin de siècle* London. The representations of such work have provided cultural historians with a mass of material with which to document the increased visibility, mobility and activity of middle-class women in the public spaces of the city. But the specificity of social action, the meanings

³ Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997) pp. 9-11 provides an excellent outline of the incidence of the use of this term in the 1890s.

and practices of these occupations and the lifestyles engendered by them have remained of minor importance to those using such examples.

It was an activity so uncontroversial, it seems at first glance, that Walkowitz sums up her consideration of the writings of women who participated in ‘East Ending’ during the 1880s with the statement, ‘female charity workers interpreted the slum as the backdrop for their own personal drama, a place to test their moral fiber or to enjoy the passing show’.⁴ The effects of such work upon women’s social and political identities, and the consequent reshaping of middle-class women’s ideas of authority, power and citizenship have thus been obscured by this recent privileging of a narrative of self and sexuality. So entering into the debate on the so called New Woman, I will explore how women’s involvement in social service in the city illuminates some neglected elements in the history of gender, in particular the other side to the imagined free wanderings of the female *flâneur*, so important to recent work on the place of women in city in the late nineteenth century.⁵ That other side, I shall argue continuing my analysis from the previous chapter, was the pull of duty and self-sacrifice and the dominant moral culture of altruism. Bringing the tension between these two ideals into the foreground is the only way in which the late nineteenth century debates surrounding the ‘woman question’ can be understood as a struggle within and over middle-class women’s own identities; a struggle which encompassed the concept of the female citizen and her place in the modern city.

i. Selfishness and the ‘New Woman’

⁴ Walkowitz, 1992 p. 57

⁵ Janet Wolff, ‘The Invisible Flaneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity’ in *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990); Elizabeth Wilson, ‘The Invisible Flaneur’ *New Left Review* 191 (1992) 90-110; Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (London: Harvard University Press); Sally Ledger, ‘Gissing, the Shopgirl and the New Woman’ *Women: A Cultural Review* 6 (1995) 263-275

After a day spent examining women's workshops in the East Midlands, the factory inspector Lucy Deane took a moment in the evening to distance herself from a contemporary typology of modern womanhood.

Found HMI Sup[erintendent] Cramp & HMI Cooke-Taylor at Hotel when I got back, had dinner with them. Cramp a fairly common rather narrow man, evidently had great prejudice about me, which I exerted myself to overcome & flatter myself I succeeded, partly because Cooke-Taylor by gassing (humbug) about 'women' & their 'noble work' gave me a good opening to incidentally inform Cramp (while speaking to Cooke-Taylor) that I was not a New Woman & didn't believe in rant & talk etc.⁶

The New Woman of the 1890s was in essence the discursive product of an extensive array of popular periodical articles and several novels addressing the 'woman question'. Present day feminist critics have linked the specific label of the New Woman with other journalistic sobriquets of the 1880s and 1890s: Eliza Lynn Linton's 'Wild Women', 'The Glorified Spinster', B.A. Crackenthorpe's 'Revolting Daughters', thereby broadening the textual and chronological sweep of the term.⁷ But by mapping all these designations onto the one object and calling her the New Woman, feminist critics have flattened out some of the important distinctions that were made between the different typologies. I shall explore this problem further in my analysis of 'The Glorified Spinster' which follows later in this chapter. In applying the umbrella term 'New Woman' to middle-class women working and travelling in the city, feminist historians have also overshadowed some of the most important conflicts fundamental to the discursive

⁶ Lucy Deane, Business Diary, 16th October, 1894 University of Warwick Modern Records Centre MSS 69/1/7

⁷ Eliza Lynn Linton, 'The Wild Women as Social Insurgents' *Nineteenth Century* 30 (1891) 596-605; Eliza Lynn Linton, 'The Wild Women as Politicians' *Nineteenth Century* 31 (1892) 79-88; Mona Carid, 'A Defense of the So Called 'Wild Women'' *Nineteenth Century* 31 (1892) 811-829; Anon., 'The Glorified Spinster' *Macmillan's Magazine* 58 (1888), 371-376; B.A. Crackenthorpe, 'The Revolt of the Daughters' *Nineteenth Century* 35 (1894) 23-32

reformation of middle-class female identity. It is this latter problem that I shall be exploring here.

The term 'New Woman' itself was first used in 1894 in a pair of articles by the novelists Sarah Grand and Ouida, and continued to evolve in its application to aspects of the literary works of Mona Caird, Olive Shreiner, George Gissing, Grant Allen and Ella Hepworth Dixon among others. During the period of its currency the term operated in this distinctively literary sphere, provoking resistance from feminist political activists such as Millicent Garret Fawcett, who objected to the manner in which the creators of the fictional 'New Woman' sought to 'link together the claim of women to citizenship and social and industrial independence with attacks on marriage and the family', thus distracting attention from women's practical efforts to obtain the former.⁸ As a literary construction therefore, the New Woman played fast and loose with the base of respectability which suffragists had so carefully constructed for their claims to citizenship. Here I want to briefly explore possible reasons for such middle-class women's resistance to this discursive construct, beyond the obvious shock of the sexual radicalism embodied in many of these texts.

Immorality was a term frequently applied to the 'New Woman' novels, and this challenge to conventional morality that readers perceived went beyond the novels' disturbance of the marriage plot. There was a sea change in the representation of female protagonists. This was not so much in terms of a new critique of the institution of marriage and sexual relations, as in a deeper shift in those parameters of virtuous action so key to the life plot of the nineteenth century heroine. In formal terms, the majority of the New Woman novels are highly conventional, and they share in common with many

⁸ Millicent Garret Fawcett, [1895] cit. Ledger, 1997 p. 15

mid-Victorian novels the structure of the protagonists' self-development, courtship and the possibility of marriage.⁹ What is distinctly new about these New Woman heroines lies in the representation of motivation: there is a challenge to the broad discourse of morality itself, in the short-circuiting the near compulsory mid-Victorian literary representation of the psychological conflict between egoism and altruism, and the depiction instead of selfishness as ruling the action of female protagonists. The desire for self-fulfilment and self-determination, in terms of sexual, intellectual or social independence forms the mainspring of the heroines of Mona Caird's *Daughters of Danaus*, Grant Allen's *The Woman Who Did* and George Gissing's *The Odd Women*, to name but three of the best known examples of New Woman fiction. The needs of the self come first and duties towards others are represented as stifling claims, trammelling the potential happiness of the heroine.

In the work of Mona Caird and Sarah Grand in particular it is possible to trace the writers' struggle with earlier representations of the female subject and duty. In the *Daughters of Danaus* and *The Beth Book*, Caird and Grand respectively re-work the troubling inheritance of George Eliot, taking the figure of the female genius and re-writing her fate, questioning the moral frameworks that so guided *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and *Middlemarch* (1871). In the discussion of the work of Eliot and Mona Caird that follows, I want to consider the texts as crucial sites in the changing discourse of female duty, as sets of cultural representations that served as key nodes in contemporary discussions of women's destinies, duties and futures.¹⁰

⁹ The works George Egerton and Olive Schreiner have however been identified as both precursors of literary modernism and 'New Women' novels by recent critics, see Ledger 1997 pp. 180-194.

¹⁰ An interesting sidelight on the significance of the novel versus the political essay in this context comes from the diary of Olive Garnett: 'Stepniak...began on marriage & free love...then he said 'why doesn't someone in England attack the marriage institution?' I said 'well someone did, Mrs Mona Caird, [this refers to Caird's earlier essay 'Is Marriage a Failure'] & as she was a person for whose judgement no one cared a fig, she got laughed at for her pains' & he said 'Oh but someone should treat the question in a novel, that

Eliot's representation of female destiny in her novels, in particular *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch*, has long proved problematic to late twentieth-century feminist critics. The act of self-renunciation performed by Maggie Tulliver in the Red Deeps, aided by the teaching of Thomas à Kempis, has frustrated feminists seeking to find textual parallels to the author's unconventional career. Ambition, talent and desire are vanquished in favour of the duties of family life and the service of the requirements of provincial life in St Oggs; the intellectual gifts of Maggie Tulliver are figuratively and literally submerged in the current of provincial life. Yet reading these novels with Stefan Collini's summation of the ideal type of Victorian morality in mind, the victory of self-abnegation over the desire for self-development is the only possible positive outcome for this novelist of high moral seriousness.

As Collini argues, the literature of Victorian moral reflection provided 'an abundance of testimony to the strains of the struggle between duty and inclination, will and appetite... The standing of duty was not here being contested, nor even for the most part being criticised for making unrealistic demands on human frailty: weakness of will was regarded as recurrent, reprehensible and remediable.'¹¹ To be moral within this dominant paradigm of nineteenth-century morality was to subdue the self in favour of the claims of others. As Eliot frames Maggie Tulliver's subjugation of her self-will;

'Often, when I have been angry and discontented, it has seemed to me that I was not bound to give up anything – and I have gone on thinking till it has seemed to me that I could think away all my duty. But no good has come of that – it was an evil state of mind. I'm quite sure that whatever I might do, I should wish in the end that I had gone without anything for myself, rather than have made my father's life harder to him.'¹²

would convert the English wouldn't it?'. (20th October 1892) Barry Johnson ed., *Tea and Anarchy: The Bloomsbury Diary of Olive Garnett, 1890-1893* (London: Bartlett's Press, 1989)

¹¹ Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850-1930* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) p. 65

¹² George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985) p. 397

The struggle between self and duty, egoism and altruism, is internal to Eliot's construction of the character; the conflict between these two forces within Maggie Tulliver is persistent and ever shifting throughout the narrative, but both elements are continually present. In the particular case of a female protagonist this struggle is an even more clear cut signifier of virtue for, as Collini briefly suggests, the dominant discourse of Victorian morality invested the feminine ideal with a far greater natural capacity for altruistic behaviour, as the complement to the greater selfish tendencies of man.¹³

Turning to Mona Caird's *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894), it is possible to read the re-working of these parameters of virtue and the careful exploration of the tension between self-fulfilment and duty in the light of the social changes of the last two decades of the last century. Caird's novel charts the life of two sisters, Hadria and Algitha Fullerton, raised in a remote castle in the Scottish lowlands. Both sisters are depicted as holding deeply critical views towards the conventional lot of women of the upper middle class, particularly concerning the practices of marriage and courtship. As the narrator wryly comments,

...by some freak of nature, the whole family at Dunaglee had shewn obstinate symptoms of individuality from their childhood, and what was most distressing, the worst cases occurred in the girls.¹⁴

Hadria Fullerton is represented as the most gifted and outspoken of the sisters, though the younger of the two. Caird's narrative focuses upon the efforts of Hadria to develop her potential as an outstanding composer and musician despite her marriage to the highly repressive Hubert Temperly, her consequent move to the prosaic landscape of the home

¹³ Collini, 1991, p. 87

¹⁴ Mona Caird, *The Daughters of Danaus* (London: Bliss, Sands & Foster, 1894) p.13

counties village of Craddock and the birth of two sons in whom she takes little interest. The novel has two dramatic crisis points which both pivot on the conflict between duty and desire, renunciation and fulfilment. In the first, Hadria leaves her husband and children to go to Paris, to launch a promising career in composition, only to return home recalled by the financial ruin of her father and her mother's subsequent collapse. In the second, she verges on an affair with the morally ambivalent Professor Theobald whom she resists only when she becomes aware of the flaws in his character.

In common with many late nineteenth-century novelists, Caird takes those tropes that in the fiction of twenty years earlier had provided something approaching positive closure, and in questioning their basis, leaves an aperture of pessimism at the end of the text.¹⁵ Hadria Temperly remains tied to her loveless husband and sons, her demanding parents and life in the village of Craddock, with her musical talent wasting away, and unlike the conclusion to *Middlemarch*, there is no possibility that her talent can be exercised quietly for the benefit of those she loves. Caird constructs Hadria as a musical 'genius', whose very originality exposes the limitations of the society in which she lives. Hadria's overdetermined choice to return home, rather than be responsible for her mother's premature death, is marked as the death of her own ambitions.¹⁶ For this character's fulfilment there can be no true life except in answering the calls of her innate talent. There can be no peace in renunciation, no wholehearted loss of self: the 'New

¹⁵ See Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 1989) pp. 185-205 on George Gissing's inversion of Dickensian tropes.

¹⁶ The figure of the female genius was a popular one with the New Woman novelists and can be traced back through a female literary tradition, through Eliot's Maggie Tulliver, Barret Browning's Aurora Leigh to Madame de Stael's *Corinne*. Mill's consideration of the role of the genius in exposing the limitations imposed upon individuality and liberty by modern, mediocre societies may explain the importance of such representations to women writers: 'Genius can only breathe freely in an *atmosphere* of freedom. Persons of genius are, *ex vi termini*, more individual than any other people – less capable consequently, of fitting themselves, without hurtful compression, into any of the small number of moulds which society provides in order to save its members the trouble of forming their own character.' John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (repr. London: JM Dent, 1993) p. 133

Woman' protagonist is no Dorothea, no latter day St Theresa.¹⁷ Caird depicts Hadria as rejecting the notion of duty to the last: "A woman is so desperately entangled, and restricted, and betrayed, by common consent in our society, that I hold her justified in using desperate means, as one who fights for dear life"; "Motherhood in our present social state, is the sign and seal as well as the means and method of a woman's bondage".¹⁸ In Caird's text the struggle over self and duty has ceased to be an internal, psychological one animating the heroine. Instead women's duty, mission or sphere, as reiterated in Hadria's diatribes, is represented as acting upon the protagonist externally, socially, as an 'ornament to an essentially degrading fact'; that of men dividing women into two great classes and 'treating one class as private and the other as public property'.¹⁹ This externalisation of duty, the figuring of it as a masculine imposition, contributes greatly to the radical political impact of Caird's novel: the very basis of nineteenth century virtue, the expectation of altruism, is represented as a mystification of male oppression.

I want to argue therefore that a great deal of the discomfort of the liberal women's movement with this novel, and I would argue the majority of the accepted 'New Woman' canon, came neither from the structural critique of marriage and the family, nor the overtly sexual nature of the text, nor indeed from the attempt to depict women with ambitions lying outside home and family: what some present day critics have framed as

¹⁷ The climatic moment of triumph and resolution in *Middlemarch* rests upon the conquering of selfishness by the recognition of duty; 'And what sort of crisis might not this be in three lives whose contact with [Dorothea's] laid an obligation on her as if they had been suppliants bearing a sacred branch? The objects of her rescue were not to be sought out by her fancy: they were chosen for her. She yearned towards the perfect Right, that it might make a throne within her, and rule her errant will. 'What should I do – how should I act now, this very day if I could clutch my own pain, and compel it to silence, and think of those three!' It had taken her long to come to that question, and there was light piercing into the room... Far off in the bending sky was the pearly light; and she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labour and endurance. She was a part of that involuntary palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining.' George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985) p. 846

¹⁸ Caird, 1894, pp. 353, 341

¹⁹ Caird, 1894, p. 306

the threat the New Woman posed to the discourse of ‘separate spheres’ of public and private. It came rather from the absence of altruism, the absorption in the self bordering upon narcissism, so antithetical to the essence of nineteenth century liberalism and the dominant Victorian discourse of virtue.

This chief part of the narrative of *The Daughters of Danaus* that concentrates upon the character of Hadria Fullerton has received ample attention from feminist critics, who have focussed on its outspoken criticisms of the state of bourgeois marriage and motherhood. The plot of the other daughter though, has received negligible analysis. It is usually merely noted that Algitha Fullerton leaves the family home to take up unspecified work in the slums of London’s East End within the first thirty pages of this three decker novel. However subordinate Algitha is a character to that of Hadria however, I want to argue that she functions in the text as a carefully placed foil and complement to the destiny of Hadria, as the title of the novel itself would suggest.

The work she [Algitha] was going to do was useful, but she did not justify herself on that ground. She claimed the right to her life and her liberty, apart from what she intended to do with either. She owed it to her conscience alone to make good use of her liberty. “I don’t want to pose as a philanthropist”, she added, “though I honestly do desire to be of service. I want to spread my wings. And why should I not ...I have elected to be *unwomanly*”.²⁰

This declaration is clearly structured around the two points of serving others and serving the self. Caird provides her female protagonist with a statement of the *a priori* claims of the liberal subject to self determination, but then adds the complexity of conscience; a conscious desire to serve others and the basis of altruism.

At key points during the action of the novel, Algitha Fullerton returns from London to visit her sister, and serves to embody the contrast between fulfilment and

²⁰ Caird, 1894, p. 31

frustration; “‘When I go to bed at night, I can say: ‘Because of me, this day, heavy hearts have been made a little lighter’. I hear all sorts of opinions, and see all sorts of people. I never was so happy in my life.’”²¹ Now it could be argued that this served for Caird, and her readers, merely as an illustration that the social conditions of 1890s Britain provided the more average single upper-middle class woman with opportunities to ‘spread [her] wings’, whilst denying such fulfilment to wives who were would-be Schoenbergs. But what I want to highlight is the careful textual construction of Algitha’s fortunate destiny in terms of service: to read this concept of service as a sign of the possibility of bridging the gap between the new and the not so new woman and resolving the tension between self-fulfilment and selfishness.

London and more specifically the East End, as a fictive location in the novel, functions as a place of work, service and sociability: the antithesis of home counties village life that Hadria is shown to endure. No action takes place there, but it figures as a place of hope and potential freedom, where ‘really wise, useful work’ provides an escape from the feeling of ‘fretting and growing irritable, for mere want of some active employment’.²² In London, Algitha can meet and marry the socialist, Wilfred Burton, who is constructed as a true partner conforming to the ideal the sisters outline at the beginning of the novel: an individual sharing one’s own desires, beliefs and, most importantly, work; ‘They [Algitha and Wilfred] intended to work on the same lines after they were married’. In comparing the lives of the two sisters, Hadria comments, “‘It is her slums that keep my sister in such good spirits’”.²³ So why does social action in the East End slums

²¹ Caird, 1894, p. 48

²² Caird, 1894, p. 29

²³ Caird, 1894, p. 458; p. 459

provide a key contrapuntal representation of contentment in this and many other of the 'New Women' fictions of the 1890s? ²⁴

I want to answer this question by returning again to what I identified in the last chapter as the transformation of duty. This is a further example of the transfer of the ethic of altruistic service from the needs of the family to the needs of the urban poor and the resultant happiness of the compromise that was the not quite so new, 'unwomanly', woman social activist. And I use the term 'happiness' advisedly here: for Caird's use of this particular term initiates a dialogue with that key nineteenth-century understanding of society and morality, Utilitarianism. John Stuart Mill's refinement of Jeremy Bentham's formula of 'the greatest happiness for the greatest number' reflects interestingly upon this tension between happiness, self and others:

The utilitarian morality does recognise in human beings the power of sacrificing their own greatest good for the good of others. It only refuses to admit that the sacrifice is itself a good. A sacrifice which does not increase, or tend to increase, the sum total of happiness, it considers wasted. The only self-renunciation which it applauds, is devotion to the happiness, or some of the means of happiness, of others; either of mankind collectively, or of individuals within the limits imposed by the collective interests of mankind.²⁵

Through devotion to the well being of others, the sum total of happiness was to be increased. And in Mill's estimation, this giving over of the self to the service of others paradoxically gave that altruistic individual 'the best prospect of realising such happiness as is attainable'.²⁶ Feminist cultural historians have been right to highlight the importance

²⁴ To Caird's Algitha Fullerton could be added Isabella Ford's creation of Miss Burton, who in visiting the poor in a common lodging house 'began talking to the people as if they were old and familiar friends. She did not look like the same woman who had poured out so much bitterness to us two evenings ago [significantly this refers to the character's announcement 'how I hate men'], for her face and manner expressed nothing but tenderness and sympathy' Isabella O. Ford, *On The Threshold* (London: Edward Arnold, 1895) p. 66. In Ella Hepworth Dixon's *The Story of a Modern Woman* (London: Heinemann, 1894) the philanthropic work of the aristocratic Alison Ives is also key to the action of the novel.

²⁵ John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (repr. London: JM Dent, 1993) p. 17

²⁶ Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 17

of the imaginary construction of 1880s and 1890s London in the discursive formation of female identities, but have underplayed the significance of this particular vision of the capital; a place where conflict over new sexual roles could be subdued or even resolved through work, service and the move from West to East.

ii. Mapping London as the Site of Duty

In looking for the *flâneuse*, the anonymous female figure of social and geographical mobility on the streets of the late nineteenth-century metropolis, feminist critics have misread the movements and the meaning of the many middle-class women who did 'go public' in poorer districts of London. In Walter Benjamin's reworking of Charles Baudelaire's archetype of modernity, the male *flâneur*, the figure is by definition one wandering aimlessly in the crowd; he is primarily an observer, 'botanizing on the asphalt'. The *flâneur* might unwittingly, in the plots of modernity refigure himself as a detective, but he maintains at all times the incognito of idleness and purposelessness.²⁷

Thinking in this way of the women who recorded their activities in social service in the late nineteenth century, of their accounts of negotiating the crowded streets of the East End and other 'darkest' parts of London, I can only really find one example that evokes the *flâneur*'s visual relationship with the crowd and the anomie of modernity.

As I hurry up and down the Tottenham Court Road and jostle up against the men and women of the 'people' with their various expressions of determined struggle, weak self indulgence and discontented effort, the conviction that the fate of each individual is governed by conditions born of the distant past is inevitably forced upon me.²⁸

²⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: New Left Books, 1973) p. 41

²⁸ Norman and Jean Mackenzie eds., *The Diaries of Beatrice Webb* Vol. I (London: Virago, 1982) p.88, entry dated 3rd June, 1883.

This particular example, coming from the diary of Beatrice Webb, I would suggest reflects her aim to ‘map out the conquered land of social life’ as a scientific social investigator: this perspective was connected with the dioramic view of the mass of the ‘poor’ that she provided in her diaries.²⁹ But I want to argue that the majority of the middle-class women who wandered the streets of the poorer districts did so far from aimlessly, anonymously or as part of the crowd.

The transformation of middle-class women’s duties in the rhetoric of social service from the 1870s onwards provided them with a highly structured means of understanding why they were there, where they were going to, geographically and ideally, and why their very visible differences from the crowd were an essential part of the process of social reform. They were on the way somewhere, for some very ‘other’ people, engaged in the work of altruism. Article after article in specialised publications such as the *Charity Organization Reporter* (later *Review*) and the *Englishwoman’s Review* described in detail the new avenues of work available to altruistically-minded educated women, and the new need of the poor for such agents of change. During the 1870s the more mainstream *Macmillan’s Magazine* not only published Octavia Hill’s prescriptive visions of the moral, spiritual and physical regeneration of the poor, but as the decade drew on these articles were also often accompanied by other pieces representing the needs of the poor, creating a framework within which only middle-class women could provide the necessary key to redemption. ‘Workhouse Girls: What they are and how to help them’, ‘Flowers for the Poor’, ‘Anglican Deaconesses’, ‘A More Excellent Way of Charity’; these articles called public attention to new organisations and movements and newly

²⁹ Mackenzie, 1982, p. 257 This ‘diorama literature’ as Benjamin terms it was central to the identity of the *flâneur*. It also should be noted that Ellen Ross argues that female social investigators tended to provide more aural than visual accounts of their encounters with the poor – an argument that my reading of Webb’s work in particular would disagree with. See Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) p. 18

structured spheres of duty for middle-class women.³⁰ They imagined routes through the city, journeys from the headquarters of altruism to the homes of the needy, where gifts or alms were secondary to the redemptive effect of the very presence of the educated, cultured, lady visitor.

Although in letters, diaries and memoirs, women social activists in London during this period frequently questioned the efficacy of such idealistic schemes, they recorded a clear sense of direction and identity in their travels across the city. Whatever dangers were perceived along the way, the woman social activist's mission was charted as a straight path through the woods. Contemporary accounts and later memoirs represent ladies equipped with the knowledge of how to read the cityscape of poverty before them, and how to place themselves into it as authoritative subjects. Margaret Nevinson recalled searching out references for potential tenants at their previous address in Flower and Dean Street 'a well known haunt of thieves' in the mid 1880s.

I was on my way to the Bank, and had a bag of coin, some £20 or more, on my wrist. As I saw the men sitting round a big fire at three o'clock in the afternoon, looking healthy and well, with steak and chips frizzling in a pan, I suddenly guessed that I was in a thieves' kitchen, and £20 would be well worth a knock on the head to a woman. I had the presence of mind to go on talking and politely inquiring into the character of Mr and Mrs _____, but sidled gently towards the door all the time, and was thankful when I stood again outside on the street.³¹

The role of the philanthropist, with its particular conjunctions of class and gender, offered both the protection of purpose – the pretext of enquiries that enabled Nevinson to sidle to the door – and the knowledge to interpret the dangers of the scene before her. She could read the scene before her as a thieves' kitchen because of the plethora of writings from the

³⁰ Joanna M Hill, 'Workhouse Girls: What they are and how to help them' *Macmillan's Magazine* (hereafter *MM*) 28 (1873) 132-140; Mary Stanley, 'Flowers for the Poor' *MM* 27 (1874) 425-429; Miss Sewell, 'Anglican Deaconesses' *MM* 28 (1873); Octavia Hill, 'A More Excellent Way of Charity' *MM* 35 (1877) 126-131

³¹ Nevinson, p. 89

1860s onwards, the secret tourism of the East End retailed by (invariably male) social explorers, that charted exactly these tableaux of London low-life. But more to the point, her identity as a lady rent collector is figured in this text as some degree of protection in itself. Nevinson's work brought her there and that philanthropic role justified, or even demanded, her presence among the semi-criminal Class A of Charles Booth's taxonomy. She belonged there, she had an obligation to be there in order to carry out the requirements of the East End Dwellings Company in regard to new tenants. Unlike the male social explorers who unsettled their readership with accounts of such scenes, Nevinson had no need for disguise and dissimulation (apart from hiding what was in the bag on her wrist). The correct recognition of who she was and what she was doing there was the basis of her security.

The 'native agency' of working-class women deployed by the Ranyard Association of Nurses and Biblewomen and the Salvation Army adopted uniforms for this purpose of recognition, but it was never suggested that middle-class women philanthropists needed to adopt particular forms of dress to defend their safety in the slums.³² The former group of women workers were given strict dress codes to mark their difference from the slum dwellers who were the object of their efforts. It was a way of signing that although they came from the same place, they now possessed an inviolable moral and spiritual authority that licensed them to venture into the darkest of tenements without insult or threat. Recognition had to be correct and immediate and cloaks, caps or bonnets were the means of achieving this instant legibility. Although some Anglican sisterhoods adopted a habit of sorts, none of the women workers in the secular

³² See [Ellen Ranyard], *London and Ten Years Work in it by the Author of the 'Missing Link'* (London: James Nisbet, 1868); Frank Prochaska, 'Body and Soul: Bible Nurses and the Poor in Victorian London' *Historical Research* 60 (1987) 336-348; for the work of the 'Hallelujah Lasses' of the Salvation Army see Walkowitz, 1992 pp. 73-76

organisations examined here felt a uniform to be necessary. I would suggest that as ladies they were confident of their own instant identification, through dress, gesture, voice and deportment, as such. They could be read and recognised as social activists without the use of uniform: after all, what else would ladies be doing in such districts?

Another example of the importance of the identity of the social activist *as* social activist to her sense of place in the city comes from the memoirs of the sanitary inspector and later, factory inspector, Rose Squire. She recalled her time staging surprise night-time inspections at dressmaking establishments in Whitechapel and Stepney in the 1890s, ‘then’ as she put it ‘very unpleasant localities’ and noted that to her surprise ‘I was never interfered with or molested’. Squire added, ‘Sometimes a constable would assist by kicking with regulation boots on a door on which my own knocks had been futile, after I had allayed his suspicions of my own strange movements by the magic words ‘factory inspector’’.³³ Middle-class women could justify and defend their place in the city streets through their identities as social activists. For this identity, or those ‘magic words’, mapped women’s place in the city in relation to others. They were not engaging in ‘strange movements’, disturbing categories of class and gender by occupying the streets at night for their own pleasure, but rather they were there for others: exploited factory girls, families in search of decent housing, applicants for aid. A middle-class woman’s secure sense of identity in ‘darkest London’ therefore rested in *not* being a *flâneuse*, not wandering anonymously and aimlessly, but as the embodiment of duty, even if that brought her into the landscape of low-life dangers. For it was a landscape nevertheless, in which she as social activist had a place and as I suggested earlier, it was a landscape that middle-class women social activists also had a significant role in bringing into being. This

³³ Rose Squire, *Thirty Years in the Public Service: An Industrial Retrospect* (London: Nisbet, 1927) p. 68

city was not a site for specular pleasure and freedom of consumption, but an envisioning of obligation, a narration of urban space as a social domain that demanded the presence of the lady on the streets.

My use of this phrase, on the streets, indicates another instance of the social activist as anti-*flâneuse* through its very awkwardness in this context. For the mission of social activists in London during this period was not about populating exteriors, landscapes or cityscapes with free strollers at all. In fact, a constant subject of ethnographic critique in the writings of social reformers and explorers was the use the poor made of the street as social space. Gossiping on door steps, dancing to barrel organs, the sociable crush of the Sunday street market, children playing shove ha'penny in alleyways – all these formed the spectacle of the theatre of the street recurrently staged and viewed from a disapproving distance by the social investigator. Philanthropic endeavours in the poorer districts of London aimed at bringing the inhabitants in off the streets, and into controlled spaces. The logic behind rent collecting schemes – ‘true homes from slums’ – relied upon the theory that improved domestic environments would bring women and children off the street, men from the pubs. Clubs for girls and boys and the Kyrle Society’s campaigns for playgrounds and open spaces worked to similar ends.

Women social activists’ work therefore did not take place in the streets, except of course as a negation of the culture of urban strolling. In representations of their work, women re-articulated the orthodox rhetorical framework of ‘outcast London’ in noting the theatre of the street, but that was not where their interests lay. Instead, their writings both private and for publication, dwell upon the intimate encounter in enclosed spaces. The street (rather obviously) was the route to somewhere else and it appears as such in the records left by women social activists: street scenes feature as distant vistas, from the

perspective of an observer, not a participant. It was usually only indoors – the home, club or factory, or within the small slum court where responsibility lay that women social activists wrote themselves into the text. These are personalised encounters with named individuals; a series of anecdotes that emphasise the profound differences between the lady and the object of her attention; illustrations of how the negation of modern anonymity and anomie could reshape members of the ‘residuum’: the reconstruction of the city into pockets of belonging and little spaces for the enactment of duty.

To illustrate this point I want to turn briefly to Margot Asquith’s autobiography. Asquith’s work has been read as confirmation that ‘slumming’ served as a pretext for the freedom of the *flâneuse* and that the poor people met along the way were no more than a picturesque backdrop: the anti-type equivalent to the loaded shop windows that she strolled past in the West End.³⁴ Certainly, Asquith’s lack of involvement with any specific philanthropic organisation, her representation of her motivation in taking up philanthropy and her wealthy family background, make her exceptional to most of the women whose work is examined here. She did not have the solid claim to occupation of the slum streets that the lady rent collector, district visitor, sanitary or factory inspector did. Asquith instead described how after her sister Laura’s death she ‘felt suffocated in the house and felt I had to be out of doors from morning to night’ and often walked in the East End of London.³⁵ Here, if anywhere amongst these memoirs is the *flâneuse*, then: an almost tragic figure, suffering from a loss of space, place and identity and seeking the fleeting stimulation of crowded streets. But Asquith’s account of her impulsion off the streets and into the manager’s office of a cardboard-box factory and her proposal to organise a

³⁴ Walkowitz, 1992 p. 53

³⁵ Margot Asquith, *The Autobiography of Margot Asquith* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1920) p. 17

dinnertime club for the women workers there is, I would argue, the story of her redemption from this state of dislocation.³⁶

In Asquith's memoir, the manager, Cliffords, voices his scepticism at her philanthropic mission to his workers, "Do you think that my girls are wicked and that you are going to make them good and happy and save them and all that kind of thing?" MARGOT: 'Not at all! I was not thinking of them, I am so very unhappy myself...It is...likely that they won't listen to me at all'.³⁷ It is the inverse of the usual self-presentation of the philanthropist, with selfishness ruling the impulse towards social action and little interest in the state of the poor. In a strange narrative of the loss and rediscovery of the self, Asquith depicted the passing of her mournful state of self-absorption through her interchanges with the women factory workers, and in particular 'my beautiful cockney, Phoebe Whitman'.³⁸

Asquith represented this process of reform, of both herself and the factory workers, through a moral geography of London. Very unusually, she visited the local pub with the women factory workers to check out the competition to her lunchtime talks. Here she lost her identity completely in what is represented as a territory of typical working-class self-indulgence: 'The room was too crowded for anyone to notice me; and I sat quietly in the corner eating my sandwiches and smoking my cigarette'. She observed the sexual banter, watching Phoebe Whitman surrounded by male admirers and administering witty remarks to those getting too close – a low life version of Asquith's presentation of

³⁶ Throughout Asquith's autobiography Laura Tennant/ Lyttleton is represented as the saintly, selfless counterpoint to Margot's 'fast' style of living. Mrs Humphry Ward dedicated *Robert Elsmere* (London: Smith and Elder, 1888) jointly to TH Green and Laura Lyttleton, two 'linked...by the love of God and the service of man', and it is often suggested that the latter was the model for the novel's saintly philanthropic heroine, Catherine. All other mentions of philanthropy in Asquith's memoirs are attributed to Laura's initiative. I would argue that this is another indication of the significance of this act of altruism to Asquith's reconstruction of her self in the aftermath of mourning.

³⁷ Asquith p. 53

³⁸ Asquith p. 55

her own role at society functions. As a result of her flirtations the ‘beautiful cockney’ got into a fight in the pub, which Asquith broke up but not before she too had ‘given and received heavy blows’. Drawn into the crowd, Asquith gestured towards the possibility of her ‘passing’ as a working-class woman.³⁹

This momentary physical and social convergence of the lady and the woman resulted in Asquith’s triumphant re-assertion of herself in relation to the factory workers and the return of both parties to their proper spaces of duty. Asquith noted ‘I made Phoebe apologise to the chief for being late and, stiff all over, returned home to Grovesnor Square...By the end of July all of the girls – about fifty two – stayed with me after work and none of them went to the [pub]’.⁴⁰ Asquith’s return to her own home paralleled the redemption of the ‘girls’ from the theatre of the street: a sense of place, home and identity was restored after the instance of identification with Phoebe Whitman through the resumption of the dutiful role of the lady reformer. Filling the little space of the factory dining room with her morally improving talks, Asquith depicted the resurgence of herself through the imperative moral subjectivity of altruism, through work for others. No longer an observant stroller, she belonged in a small part of Whitechapel, where she was known for what she did, rather than who she was.

I want to argue that the widespread discursive construction of London as a place of sexual danger, social voyeurism and risky freedom – a place for cultural historians to trace the free wanderings of the female *flâneur* – was therefore just one of many competing visions of the capital in the late nineteenth century. That particular discourse of urban life, which has now become for us the history of modernity itself, shared the contest over the

³⁹ Walkowitz, 1992 p. 54 also notes this as an example of ‘passing’, although she draws a very different conclusion as to its meaning.

⁴⁰ Asquith pp. 56-7

meaning of space and identity in the city with several other narratives that attempted to map the novelty of the metropolis. In the search for what the modern city was and who its inhabitants were in a state of becoming, the largely French concept, the *flâneur*, was just one answer. Running counter to the framework that we now think of as the identity of modernity itself – anonymity, anomie and a surfeit of specular pleasures – was an envisioning of modern city life that placed the concept of duty and identities of class at its centre.

Although at first glance the latter understanding of metropolitan identity might seem far from ‘modern’, I want to suggest that in the late nineteenth century the subject of class-specific duty did embody a new level of anxiety about the conditions of modern existence. Whereas the *flâneur* sought to observe and experience the modern public spaces of the city that brought him into being, the anxious figure of the dutiful bourgeois subject tried to know and amend them, charting their moral geography and classifying their inhabitants. The contemporary writings of social investigators and reformers are thus structured by an uneasy rhetorical movement in mapping London for the reading public. There is a legible tension in such texts between alternative modes of placing the self into the abject cityscape of the slums, between staging the unknown as an exotic spectacle passing by the static figure of the observer and a far more familiar scene of the respectable poor meeting the active philanthropist in the enactment of duty.

The writings of Charles Booth, Henrietta and Samuel Barnett, Helen Bosanquet and Charles Masterman on the geography of London poverty, contain a recurrent motif in which the fears and fantasies of an unknowable city of radical difference are evoked, only to be dismissed in favour of something far more homely and far less threatening. It suggests firstly the desire of the social explorers and their implied readers to visualise

otherness on their very doorsteps – to know of, to feel, but not to understand, this coupling of the familiar with the strange.

Without warning or observation, a movement and a sound have arisen in those unknown regions surrounding the kindly, familiar London that we know...Our streets have suddenly become congested with a weird and uncanny people...They brushed the police away like an elephant dispersing flies. They could have looted and destroyed, plundered and razed it to the ground. We stared at them in amazement. Whence did they all come, these creatures with strange antics and manners, these denizens of another universe of being?⁴¹

Masterman's reflection upon the people of the 'Abyss' of South London in the early twentieth century could stand in as easily for accounts of the 'natives' of the East End in the 1880s. Although the representational tools had changed – the explicitly racialised language of the Socio-Darwinian framework evident in writings from the 1880s in particular giving way to a more psychological vision – the rhetoric of difference was largely the same.⁴² Still prominent was fear of the unknown, cross cut by the desire to see it, manage it and domesticate it: the need of the social observer to make the familiar unfamiliar in order to bring strangeness home. Yet after evoking this dreamlike diorama of the uncanny irrupting into the familiar and homely, Masterman dismissed this fantasy as just that. The charitable visitor 'stimulated to heroic enterprise' nervously enters the 'forgotten regions of the poor', only to be disillusioned. For where 'he had expected a chaotic and sodden wilderness; he finds an immensity of clean streets, trim houses,

⁴¹ CFG Masterman, *From the Abyss: Of its Inhabitants, by One of Them* (1902 repr. London: Garland, 1980) pp. 2-3

⁴² Stedman Jones, 1971 p. xxi; David Owen, *English Philanthropy, 1600-1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965) p. 503; Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973; repr. London: Hogarth Press, 1993) p. 220. There are significant parallels between such modes of reading the city and the narratives of nineteenth-century travel writing, see Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

curtained windows'.⁴³ It was here, in these strangely calm streets that the philanthropist's duty really lay.

This split-screen vision of what the social problems of London really looked like, of how the fears and fantasies of the late nineteenth century metropolis could be mapped on to the streets, has its clearest and oddest expression in Charles Booth's Introduction to the series *Life and Labour in London*. He charted his motivation in undertaking his research project and framed both the resulting text and the 'reality' it represented as a spectacle.

East London lay hidden from view behind a curtain on which were painted terrible pictures... horrors of drunkenness and vice; monsters and demons of inhumanity; giants of disease and despair. Did these pictures truly represent what lay behind, or did they bear to the facts the same relation to that which the pictures outside a booth at some country fair bear to the performance or show within? This curtain we have tried to lift.⁴⁴

Even in the moment of dismissing the 'terrible pictures' that served as the sign of East London life in the 1880s, and exposing it as mere crowd pulling, purse emptying rhetoric on the part of such reformers as Andrew Mearns and William Booth, Charles Booth positioned himself in this text as ringmaster and showman. He was to be the man to lift the curtain to reveal the true first act of real East Londoner's lives, specially staged and cast for the consumption of those who had no knowledge of these strange beings. Booth's presentation of his investigative project relies upon a common rhetorical manoeuvre in the published writings of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century social investigators and activists.⁴⁵ The exotica of the East End (or the Abyss of South London) is evoked only to

⁴³ Masterman, p. 29

⁴⁴ Charles Booth ed., *Life and Labour of the People I: East London* (3rd ed. London: Williams and Norgate, 1891) p. 172

⁴⁵ The use of these techniques of staging the spectacle of 'the poor' has been explored most effectively by John Lucas, 'Gerard Manley Hopkins and Arthur Symons: Two Views of the City' in John Stokes ed. *Fin de*

be dismissed by the thorough scientific knowledge of the expert writer. The fictive structures of the racialised 'residuum' are constantly sought for but lost, in a wilderness of neat streets, of quiet and respectable poverty.

Of course Booth's famous poverty map, which charted deprivation street by street in the colours of sunrise, from the black streets of the residuum, through lightening shades of blue for degrees of poverty to the dawning red and yellow of comfort and prosperity, was an attempt to pin down this unstable cityscape once and for all. But still, if the strange case of George Gissing and the Reverend Osbourne Jay is anything to go by, Booth's mapping of poverty made it no easier for social reformers to represent their lives and work with London's slum dwellers in the 1890s. Osbourne Jay was the vicar of Holy Trinity, Shoreditch and presided over the Old Nichol slum, a network of alleys which later achieved notoriety as 'The Jago'.⁴⁶ On reading a review of Osbourne Jay's description of his daily life and work, *The Social Problem*, Gissing sent a spate of letters to the *The Times* accusing the Reverend of lifting whole paragraphs from his novel *The Nether World* (1889) without a word of acknowledgement.⁴⁷ Osbourne Jay explained this as an oversight on his part eventually, after a protracted public conflict. Yet the surprising fact remained that a man authorised to write by his own experience of years working among the poor of the East End, sought refuge in the previous imaginings of a novelist, rather than giving form to his own interactions with his parishioners and the physical realities of slum life. It was easier it seems, to rely upon the rhetorical shorthand, the imaginary geography of the East End that had evolved over the 1880s in order to provide

Siècle/ Fin de Globe: Fear and Fantasies of the Late Nineteenth Century (London: Macmillan, 1992) pp. 63-79; see also Walkowitz, 1992 pp. 30-32.

⁴⁶ Arthur Morrison, *A Child of the Jago* (1896; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1946) Morrison dedicated the book to Osbourne Jay.

⁴⁷ Pierre Coustillas ed., *London and the Life of Literature in Late Victorian England: The Diaries of George Gissing, Novelist* (Sussex: Harvester, 1978) entries for September, 1893 pp. 314-317

an instantly recognisable picture of slum life, than to deal with the uncertainty and diversity of Shoreditch itself.

This seems to have taken us far from the figure of the female philanthropist as anti-*flâneuse*. But there is an important connection to be made here. This very strangeness of those areas of London imagined as the haunts of abject poverty – the East End and later, parts of South London – dislocated the sexual geography of upper and middle-class gender relations. In these areas of the city over which social investigators fought representational battles, the logic of public and private, masculine and feminine, had little application. It was a territory of uncertain boundaries and of unknown qualities in which the conventional division of social space along gender lines had no points of reference for the middle-class philanthropist. This seemingly unknowable ‘outcast London’ therefore demanded a new understanding of gendered subjectivity. It was a place so different that despite a mission that attempted to bring about a more conventional occupation of social space along gender lines, the lady philanthropist’s duty was everywhere about her.

Placing the female subject into this alternative narrative of the modern city enables an escape from the constricting debate that has grown up around the existence or otherwise of the *flâneuse*. Feminist critics have found the idea of the *flâneur* as the founding figure of modernity problematic because with this understanding of modernity comes a vision of a city divided sharply into public and private, masculine and feminine. Janet Wolff has argued that women could not therefore experience modernity at all, as they were trapped in the domestic sphere, unable to move around the streets for fear of losing respectability. However, in a city that was imagined not primarily as one divided into public and private, but into social and anti-social, the visible presence of the lady was called for to contain and constrain the mass into controllable, knowable spaces. This was

how middle-class women could experience the modern city: by attempting to map the landscape of class, the metropolis of difference that resulted from modernity itself. But it was not a task for all women. As contemporary writers' perceived it, such a mode of existence in the modern city necessitated and brought into being a new and distinct identity - the Glorified Spinster – an altruistic but asexual creature who established her freedom through service.

iii. Unsexing the City: Social Service and 'The Glorified Spinster'

In the late summer of 1888 Ella Pycroft and Beatrice Webb both 'read with amusement' an article that had appeared in *Macmillan's Magazine* which seemed to sum up their present existence.⁴⁸ The two women had met whilst working together as rent collectors in the Whitechapel working class dwellings, Katherine Buildings, during 1885. Pycroft remained in her salaried position in the Buildings for the next five years, whilst Webb left after six months and pursued her early work as a social investigator. Pycroft's letters to Webb over the following years contained detailed accounts of her life and work in Whitechapel, the inhabitants of Katherine Buildings and observations on the lot of the single woman who needed to earn her own living. The article which interested them both so much was titled 'The Glorified Spinster', a wry account of the way of life of a 'new species' that had been evolving in the city over the 'last two decades'.⁴⁹

To the 'careless observer', the author of the article conceded, the Glorified Spinster might appear no different to the ordinary genus of the spinster from which she had evolved. But look closer and,

...if he note her self-reliant bearing, her air of having some definite business to perform in a definite time, her general aspect of being

⁴⁸ Webb diary entry 3rd September, 1888, Mackenzie, 1982 p. 261

⁴⁹ Anon. 'The Glorified Spinster' *Macmillan's Magazine* 58 (1888) 371-376

ready to meet emergencies, he will begin to see he has here something differing considerably from the ordinary female. Other characteristic marks are her agility in gaining the tops of omnibuses, her power of entering trams without stopping the horses, her cool self-possession in a crowd, her utter indifference to the weather, and, it must be added, an undoubted disposition to exact her rights to the uttermost farthing.⁵⁰

The newness of this creature the Glorified Spinster was marked by her confident possession of an urban identity. She moved purposefully through the crowded streets, never losing a sense of self and direction in the *mêlée* of the modern metropolis. Invulnerable to the weather, to the close press of other bodies, and to attempts to deprive her of her right to economic self-determination, she indicated a challenge to 'those divisions of mankind which have been hitherto recognised'. Her sense of self, distinct from the prospect of marriage, rejecting the need for male protection, disturbed assumptions surrounding sexed identity to such an extent that the author concluded 'uniting some of the characteristics of both sexes, she differs from both in essential points'.⁵¹

Beatrice Webb judged it a 'cleverish paper', resonating as it did with her own thinking concerning the existence of 'masculine' women in need of 'masculine rewards for their work'.⁵² And for Ella Pycroft, the fictive identity of the Glorified Spinster provided the tools for her to express her own ambivalence towards marriage. On announcing her engagement to the social activist Maurice Eden Paul, she asserted that she was not distressed by the impossibility of their marriage for a good few years because 'I must confess it would grieve me sadly if there were any near prospect of giving up my work's glorified spinsterhood'.⁵³ I want to explore here why this particular representation

⁵⁰ 'The Glorified Spinster' p. 371

⁵¹ 'The Glorified Spinster' p. 375

⁵² Beatrice to Richard Potter, November 1885 in Norman Mackenzie ed., *The Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978)

⁵³ BL PES Passfield Papers 2/1/2/7 Ella Pycroft to Beatrice Potter, 21st September 1888

of a new urban female identity worked for these two women. What points of identification did it offer Webb and Pycroft, while both were in the midst of searching for a fulfilling vocation serving the needs of the social? And why was this model adopted and adapted by these self-styled pioneers, whilst the later typology of the New Woman seems to have been viewed by social activists as always somewhere else or someone else?⁵⁴

The article provided an archetype of the urban professional lady. With remarkable fondness and tenderness it described the minutiae of the life of such women; the litany of little furnished rooms, bookshelves stocked with the works of John Stuart Mill and Walt Whitman. It tells a story so common to tales of women in the city in the 1880s; cheap dinners eaten alone and given flavour by the ‘treats’ of the workingman – shrimps, watercress, pressed tongue: shabbiness brightened by ‘absorbing conversation’ with friends ‘concerning all things on heaven and earth, while toasting our toes at the shabby little bedroom grate’.⁵⁵ It balances the precious guarding of freedom of opinion, of social and spatial mobility against the Glorified Spinster’s generous disbursement of her tiny income among family dependants – altruistic ‘despite the apparent selfishness of her mode of life’.⁵⁶ It is, above all, a narrative of work, examining the daily routine of ladies employed as ‘teachers, nurses, accountants, clerks, heads of certain business departments and so forth’ and their constant struggle with the ‘nature’ of their own sex and the opposition of the other in the workplace.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ See p.101

⁵⁵ ‘The Glorified Spinster’ p. 373 For a remarkably similar representation of the life of single women in 1880s London see Isabella O. Ford, *On the Threshold* (London: Edward Arnold, 1895), down to the details of diet (p. 12), reading matter (p. 87) and setting the world to rights over the bedroom grate (p. 52).

⁵⁶ ‘The Glorified Spinster’ p. 372

⁵⁷ ‘The Glorified Spinster’ p.373

The article's solution to this tension was the deployment of this new species of women as 'ready instruments in the battle against ignorance, vice and crime'.

Those who possess by inheritance woman's passionate pity for suffering and power of self-abnegation, while hard necessity has, perforce, taught them something of self-control, coolness of judgement, and the adaptation of means to ends, should be the knight-errants of forlorn hopes, the unfailing champions of the miserable, the sworn foes of all abuses. They should find their happiness in expending for the public advantage those powers for the good which in other women find their natural and right use in the family circle.⁵⁸

This construction of female identity and social service returns us to those parameters of moral virtue, self-abnegation and altruism. Social action in the city is once again represented as the compromise of the new and the good, the lady and her need for independence. Happiness results from the service of others: the nature of women's duty remains whilst evolution shifts who it is natural to apply to. It is here, I would argue, that the crucial distinction lies between the rhetoric of the 'New Woman' and the representation of the Glorified Spinster. For this earlier consideration of shifting gender relations leaves unchallenged the association between female duty and female virtue. It is here, too, that one finds the most obvious point of identification for our two readers, Webb and Pycroft, who both worried at the knot surrounding female independence and womanly duty, self-servingness and social service.

But I want to argue that another, though related, reason for these readers' identification with the Glorified Spinster was the article's celebration of female celibacy, not as a lack, but as a positive addition to women's identities. In its stress on singlehood and employment as positive vocations for Glorified Spinsters, the article simply sidesteps the issues of sexual relations that so preoccupied literary outpourings concerning the

⁵⁸ 'The Glorified Spinster' p. 376

‘New Woman’ six years later. The New Woman as embodied in the fiction and journalism of the early 1890s, unlike the Glorified Spinster was not an unsexed woman, a manly woman, but representation of a sexual woman who repudiated the legal structures and social assumptions of marriage and the family. But for the Glorified Spinster the possibility of marriage was represented as improbable due to their independence and lack of gentleness and softness. One of this new breed is quoted as saying ‘we should be ticketed Not in the marriage market, and then be allowed perfect freedom in choosing our friends’. For the Glorified Spinster was, the author argues, most likely to be treated as ‘good fellow’ by men whom she met socially and therefore, the social codes surrounding the interaction of men and women should be waived for them in the light of this asexuality. The voluntary forfeiting of sexual availability was constructed as the necessary precursor to the confident occupation of urban space. By identifying themselves as not in the marriage market, or even, not really feminine, the Glorified Spinster could ‘like meteors...wander free in interfamilial space, obeying laws and conventions of their own’.⁵⁹

The imagined freedom that came with asexuality, the possibility of voicing strong opinions, socialising freely and pursuing a career, was vital for the reshaping of middle-class female subjectivity in relation to social action. Instead of channelling the impulses of love and affection narrowly and almost selfishly upon the family, these asexual creatures were to disperse these emotions, with the checks and balances of self-control and coolness of judgement, among the poor. It was London which had evolved this new ‘variety of *Femina*’ – a metropolis where middle-class women were obliged to earn their own living

⁵⁹ ‘The Glorified Spinster’ p. 372

and could move about without question and without a whisper of sexual fears or desires in the course of their work: it was a heterosocial and asexual cityscape.

This lack of sexualised geography is perhaps all the more surprising given the moment of the article's publication and its reception by these two readers. By mid-September 1888 when Webb and Pycroft commented upon the article, Polly Nicholls and Annie Chapman had already become the first two victims of 'Jack the Ripper' in Whitechapel, where Pycroft lived and worked. Of course, the schedule of periodical publication makes it clear that the article itself had been written before the murders took place. But there is no mention of these events in Pycroft's letters to Webb, not even a suggestion of a sense of sexual danger and the risk of moving about the streets in the aftermath of these horrific occurrences. Instead, Pycroft related her movements around Whitechapel as usual: arguing with the Barnetts at Toynbee Hall about the propriety of employing a Catholic lady as rent collector, attending Charles Booth's lecture and dealing with tenants. In the light of recent cultural histories of gender and the city during this period, such imperturbability seems very odd. Walkowitz, in particular, has presented her readers with a cityscape of the 1880s that was thick with sexual danger, contest and meaning, in which the discourses surrounding the Ripper murders whipped up a hysterical fervour concerning Whitechapel.

But what I want to argue here is that for those women social activists whose work brought them into routine and intimate contact with poor men and women, sexual brutality entered into a logic of class difference. Slum neighbourhoods could be perceived as free from sexual threat to middle-class women social activists because sexuality itself was mapped onto the bodies of working-class men and women. Sexual desire and physical violence were bound together as markers of the existence of a

degraded class of poor: what threat there was arose in the interchanges between poor men and women, perpetuating their existence. Nevinson summarised the rent collectors' failure to put a stop to domestic violence in Katherine Buildings: "Don't you go near 'im Miss," said one battered wife calmly. "You're a Lady and ain't used to 'im, we are you see"...there is always a strong feeling that: 'men will be men' and all excess and violence are readily forgiven them on account of the weakness of their sex'.⁶⁰

A recurrent motif in women's accounts of their social work is this intimate connection between sexual desire and violence as a distinguishing feature of class identity.

Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence repeated a popular anecdote concerning a woman whose husband had signed the pledge and consequently stopped beating her, "Since my 'usband went to the [mission] 'all, 'e ain't like a 'usband at all – 'e's more like a friend". She continued her observations on the 'peculiar point of view with regard to wife-beating' as follows,

A friend of mine was once walking along the street and she passed a woman who had a black eye. At the same time two other women passed, and one of them remarked: 'Well, all I can say is, she is a lucky woman to have a husband to take that trouble with her'.⁶¹

Margaret Harkness represented a similar view of the inalienable connection between working-class sexuality, marriage and abuse; "I'm yer 'usband ain't I?" Is their invariable answer to any complaint, which means "I can knock you over if I like".⁶² What I want to suggest is that these representations of class and sexuality did not just reflect a concern for the battered bodies of working-class women (though of course, that was part of it). But further, it worked to distance sexuality from the personal world of the social activist,

⁶⁰ Nevinson, 1926 p. 91

⁶¹ Pethick-Lawrence, 1938 p. 82

⁶² Margaret Harkness, *A City Girl: A Realistic Story* (London: Vizetelly, 1887) p. 13

living or working in the slums. Sexuality in outcast London was read as violence, as the brutal desire that drew working-class men and women together and prevented them from ever really escaping their destinies as members of the 'residuum'.

Rudyard Kipling's short story 'The Record of Badalia Herodsfoot' is the clearest presentation of this belief in the futility of philanthropy and self-improvement in the face of the brutal logic of working-class sexuality. It is of particular interest here as the eponymous working-class heroine is entrusted with the financial 'record' of local charitable organisations and licensed to distribute alms among her neighbours by middle-class philanthropists who value her superior insight into poverty. Empowered as she is by such a trust, Badalia still seeks to win back her wandering husband with 'a little timely submission' but is murdered by him in his attempt to get hold of the 'record' and accompanying cash. The text constructs this outcome as the inevitable result of the innate sexual violence in working-class relationships, however intelligent and powerful the individuals concerned might be. Badalia's desire for, and submission to her husband is shown to be part of a pre-determined pattern of sexual relations among the urban poor; her sexual knowledge and invitation the counterpart to his violence and brutality.⁶³

By investing in such representations of sexuality, women social activists could contain the risk of sexual violence within the bounds of class. It was never represented as something that spilled over to affect the lady and there was never a whisper of miscegenous desire between the lady and the slum dwelling man (although the plot of desire between the gentleman and the flower girl was the foundation of many fantasies).⁶⁴

⁶³ Rudyard Kipling, 'The Record of Badalia Herodsfoot' in *Many Inventions* (London: English Library, 1905)

⁶⁴ The ancient plot of the Prince and the pauper girl was given a new twist in the work of George Gissing, among other writers in the 1880s and 1890s. Cross class sexual desire works in the plot of *Thyrza* as the inevitable corruption of the philanthropic mission of the gentleman, destroying the ideal of friendship between the classes with the threat of miscegenation. For similar readings of the dangers of male philanthropy see Margaret Harkness, *A City Girl* (1887) and Clara Collet 'Undercurrents' (unpublished MS,

Sexuality was read by women social activists as the violent marker of a distinct class grouping, and not as a vague threat that permeated through to the lady going about her duty in the East End streets.⁶⁵

Henrietta Barnett dismissed with some irritation the idea that the East End was a place of sexual danger and physical threat to middle-class women;

Many times have I been asked if I am not 'afraid to walk in East London', and an article on the People's Entertainment Society aroused, not unjustly, the anger of the East London people at the writer's description of them and of her fears of her personal safety while standing in the Mile End Road.⁶⁶

Although no spinster, Barnett invested in the self-construction of the female social activist as a fearless and impermeable creature, able to experience freedom of movement in urban space because her duty had led her to read, to map and to know the poor to a level of expertise. In 'electing to be *unwomanly*', in the words of Mona Caird's character Algitha Fullerton, by seeking to know and amend the cityscape of the poor, women social activists could authorise their occupation of urban space through a narrative of dutiful work. The representational tools that such women drew upon in characterising their place in the city

MRC MSS 29/3/13/4/18). On fears and fantasies of miscegenation in the nineteenth century see Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London: Routledge, 1995); Griselda Pollock, "'With my Own Eyes": Fetishism, the Labouring Body and the Colour of its Sex' *Art History* 17 (1994) 342-382

⁶⁵ An exception to this exists in the memoirs of Katherine Furse where she recalled that during her time working for the London C.O.S. in 1897-8, 'I went through sex fears, and used to be terrified of walking alone in the streets... Working in social service in those days one came across amazing ignorance of facts in one's colleagues and at the same time a good deal of experience of the misuse of sex, so that the nightmare of White Slave traffic etc. took hold of the imagination of many girls brought in to help.' Furse, p. 156. Age and inexperience, had I think, a great deal to do with Furse's fear of the London streets. In her early twenties and still very much under the control of her mother at home, she had little basis for identification with the confident self-possession of the Glorified Spinster.

⁶⁶ Henrietta Barnett, 'Passionless Reformers' in *Practicable Socialism: Essays on Social Reform* ed. Henrietta and Samuel Barnett (London: Longmans, 1888; 2nd ed. 1894) pp. 88-98 (p. 88) An element of this dismissal was the rhetorical movement used in representing 'outcast London' which I discussed on pp.120-124. Barnett sought to dismantle the idea that the East End was a seething mass of the degraded poor, and protested with a display of her expert knowledge that 'the vast number of people, who, while poor in money, are rich in life's good, who live quiet thoughtful lives' were forgotten in such apocalyptic visions of London. (p. 88)

were very different from the framework of sexuality and self-determination that was the New Woman. Not so new, and not so much of the woman, women social activists represented themselves at such a pitch of virtuous self-abnegation before the needs of others that femininity itself was forfeited on behalf of the needs of the late nineteenth century city.

iv. Conclusion

This city, this London constructed in the writings of social activists, demanded the presence of middle-class women outside their own homes as moral agents and social reformers. Women were called upon to reform the lives of the poor in the deprived streets of the district where they lived, and as the century progressed, to traverse the 'bifurcated cityscape' and manage the masses in the benighted East End. It was a presence and a geographical mobility predicated upon class difference and the cultural assumptions of bourgeois femininity. It was an activity so uncontroversial, it seems at first glance, that Walkowitz sums up her consideration of the writings of women who participated in 'East Ending' during the 1880s with the statement, 'female charity workers interpreted the slum as the backdrop for their own personal drama, a place to test their moral fiber or to enjoy the passing show'.⁶⁷ But I cannot dismiss this activity so essential to the practical and ideological construction of the British women's movement in this way. The slums and the slum dwellers were not a mere backdrop to the adventures of middle-class women in London streets. They were rather the necessary others in the dialogic development of new professional female identities in the late nineteenth century. The homes, streets and workplaces of the poor were sites where middle-class women exercised authority and

⁶⁷ Walkowitz, 1992 p. 57

gained power through taking down the stories and attempting to reshape the lives of the urban 'residuum'; a practice marked with contest, resistance and struggle, but over determined by class. This site of cross-class interaction was one which justified and demanded the formation of new identities, new characteristics of middle-class women. In the three case studies of different forms of social action that follow this chapter, I will be exploring the specific practices and the particular formations of class and gender consequent upon such interactions.

[5]

Domesticating the Slums: Lady Rent-Collectors and their Tenants

[Rent-collecting] has brought to you...I am sure, a real attachment to your people [tenants]. *You know they are yours; they know it;* and as the years go on this sense of attachment will deepen and grow.¹ (Octavia Hill, 1879)

Each of the three case studies that form the second half of this thesis focuses upon a specific form of social exchange between ‘ladies’ and ‘the poor’. In concentrating upon the three types of social action selected, I want to give more detailed histories to rent-collecting, social work within the Charity Organisation Society and women’s workplace inspection than has been possible in the first four chapters. I will situate these different areas of social reform within their distinct intellectual genealogies, tracing their relationship with changing discourses of metropolitan class (and gender) relations.

But perhaps more importantly than this, it is from here onwards that detailed accounts of middle-class women’s interactions with the poor come to the fore. I trace what has often been neglected in histories of the subject – the practical applications of each type of social action, exploring the interchange between ladies and the objects of their dutiful attention that lay at the heart of these late-nineteenth century schemes of social regeneration.² As far as has proved possible, I use unpublished, intimate and immediate accounts of middle-class women’s attempts to implement theories of social

¹ Octavia Hill, *Letter to My Fellow Workers* (London: Houseboy Brigade, 1879) p. 5 (my emphasis)

² The historiography of women and social action tends either to privilege an analysis of broad social theory over an exploration of what such work involved in terms of daily practice or to consist of biographical accounts based on the published work of a few prominent women reformers: neither approach has much scope for examining the dynamics of the philanthropic encounter per se.

reform in the homes and workplaces of ‘outcast London’ – sometimes uncomfortable narratives of perceiving and managing profound differences. *It is in these narratives, I argue, that the creation of new gender identities through cross-class relationships can be seen in process. In the often fraught practice of individual reform, women social activists found conventional formulations of middle-class feminine identity and authority wanting. Their accounts of such work embody a struggle to find new models of selfhood – a struggle that was often resolved using the markers of class that lay before them.*

Each form of social action I examine called for different methods of managing the cross-class encounter and provided varying formulas for seeing, reading, narrating and reshaping the people under its gaze. Bodies, clothes, voices, rumours and above all, domestic interiors were generally the common scattered signs from which the reformer was to draw a coherent causal narrative of decline and the possible happy ending of regeneration. But in each different form of social action, the lady reformer drew upon diverse legal and moral formulations of authority. It was these specific structures that in each case shaped the encounter between ladies and the poor, delimiting their duties and rights and mapping out the territory of social reform. Whilst some women social activists found the theoretical ideals of reform that they espoused ineffective in practice, it was rare that any questioned the particular ascriptions of authority that enabled them to enter other people’s homes without knocking, pull open their drawers, question their relatives and scrutinise their working conditions. As I suggested earlier, the basis of this authority was the (relatively) secure class identity of the lady.³ But on a more immediate and practical level, the powers to evict or to house, to aid or to dismiss as ‘undeserving’ and to take the word of an employee or to dismiss her as an untrustworthy witness as to working

³ See above pp. 28-30

practices, were integral to specific forms of social action. If we are to read the scattered records of such encounters as sources for an examination of the role of class in constructing new gender identities it is also necessary to mark out what was due to the particular context and practices of these cross-class encounters. To start with then, I will outline the development of the practice of rent collecting and the scope of the lady rent-collector's authority.

i) Octavia Hill and the Re-making of the Landlady

Octavia Hill took over the management of her first slum court in Marylebone in 1864. Funded by her friend, John Ruskin, Hill promised to provide a five per cent return on his investment whilst improving the appearance and moral tone of both the alley of decaying cottages and the tenants who lived there.⁴ By 1874, Hill and the host of lady volunteers trained by her were responsible for fifteen different housing schemes throughout London, mostly old, run down streets and courts but with a few newer properties dotted throughout the capital. Hill's philanthropic scheme was a simple one on the face of it: the perfunctory efforts of the landlord's 'ordinary clerk' were to be replaced by the regular attentions of a 'sympathetic...lady' volunteer. The weekly round of rent collection was to be transformed into an altruistic gesture and the waged working-class male collector displaced by a handful of ladies, interested only in the tenants and not in personal remuneration.⁵ Still, as Hill reiterated constantly in her writings, the lady

⁴ For a useful overview of philanthropic housing schemes in London and New York and their combination of business and philanthropy see Eugenie Ladner Birch and Deborah S. Gardener, 'The Seven-Percent Solution: A Review of Philanthropic Housing, 1870-1910' *Journal of Urban History* 7 (1981) 403-436; for Octavia Hill's role in the development of such schemes see Jane Lewis, *Women and Social Action in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1991) pp. 34-53; Julia Parker, *Women and Welfare: Ten Victorian Women in Public Social Service* (London: Macmillan, 1989) pp. 153-164; Caroline Morrell, 'Octavia Hill and Women's Networks in Housing Management' in *Gender, Health and Welfare* ed. Ann Digby and John Stewart (London: Routledge, 1996) pp. 90-118

⁵ As Eileen Yeo has recently pointed out, the growing involvement of middle-class women in social action led to a pattern whereby working-class men were displaced from wage-earning roles as sanitary inspectors,

collectors were strict about keeping the tenants up to date with their payments, always mindful of their duty to provide that minimum five percent to the landlord or shareholders and to enforce the discipline of thrift and regularity upon the tenants.

Hill was a very effective publicist for her work. *Macmillan's Magazine* published a whole series of articles by her about her work throughout the 1870s, and Hill was also a regular contributor to the *Charity Organisation Review* throughout her working life. These articles told stories that proved the triumph of the lady-collectors over the encroachments of the slums. As I discussed at greater length in Chapter Three, Hill argued that the very presence of the lady rent-collector stimulated the tenants into a greater sense of social duty; cleaning their children and homes, shamed into saving and insuring against illness and unemployment by the superior exemplar of their collector. In popularising her schemes Hill wrote a new role for the lady philanthropist as wise, firm, practical and with a considerable amount of business acumen. But at the same time she figured property management as a proper feminine duty, representing it as an extended version of the lady's duties in running her own household and arguing that 'Ladies must do it, for it is household work'.⁶ The lady was to draw upon her innate propensity to sympathy, her superior moral influence and her practical experience of managing servants, and through them, the domestic environment. The collectors were, Hill argued drawing upon an explicitly Ruskinian idea of gender relations, to rule like 'Queens...each in her own domain...I should like them to take complete control as they would of their own house, garden or field'.⁷

C.O.S. agents or building managers by lady volunteers throughout the late nineteenth century. See Eileen Janes Yeo *The Contest for Social Science* (London: Rivers Oram, 1996) p. 223

⁶ Octavia Hill, *Letter to My Fellow Workers* (London: Houseboy Brigade, 1883)

⁷ Octavia Hill, *The Importance of Raising the Poor Without Almsgiving* (repr. from Transactions of the Social Science Association, 1869) See John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies: Two Lectures* (London: Smith and Elder, 1864) 'Of Queen's Gardens' pp.121-2: 'the woman's power is for rule, not for battle, - and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement and decision. She sees the

Hill certainly succeeded in naturalising such work as appropriate for ladies, as the proliferation of middle-class women's involvement in housing management schemes throughout the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries suggests.⁸ But it is important to emphasise just how different such work was from the tradition of female philanthropy and district visiting and the break it formed in ideas of women's place in social reform. In differentiating her 'fellow workers' from the majority of women involved in philanthropic work, Hill herself used the concept, once again, of degrees of duty.

The care of tenants calls out a sense of duty founded on relationship; the work is permanent; and the definite character of much of it makes its progress marked... Why have you not chosen transitory connection with hundred of receivers of soup, or pleasant intercourse with little Sunday scholars, or visiting among the aged and bed-ridden, who were sure to smile when you went to them, and had no right to say a word of reproach to you about your long absences in the country? Why did you not take up district visiting, where, if any family did not welcome you, you could just stay away? Because you preferred work where duty was continuous and distinct, and where it was mutual.⁹

It was this mutual duty that Hill placed at the centre of her scheme of regeneration. The tenants were obliged to pay the collectors and the collectors were duty bound in return to visit their tenants at least once a week. This was no broad ill-defined sense of social obligation, but an exchange legally encoded, judicially enforced. From what Hill termed this 'natural' connection, founded on an economic transaction, flowed the timely words of advice and instruction that 'moved, touched and taught' the tenants into better manners and morals.¹⁰ Although Hill chose to formulate the distinction between such committed

qualities of things, their claims and their places. Her great function is Praise; she enters no contest'. Ruskin's lecture is, of course, seen as the ultimate expression of the ideology of 'separate spheres', of public and private, male and female duties in the late nineteenth century.

⁸ See Birch and Gardener, 1981 and below for the employment of ladies as rent collectors and salaried buildings managers in the new model tenements constructed in the 1880s and 1890s.

⁹ Octavia Hill, *Letter to My Fellow Workers* (London: Houseboy Brigade, 1880)

¹⁰ Octavia Hill, *The Importance of Raising the Poor Without Almsgiving* (repr. from Transactions of the Social Science Association, 1869) p. 2

‘workers’ and other dilettante philanthropists in terms of duty, it is useful to think briefly about the rights that the lady collector exercised in her work.

The lady rent collectors were agents for the landlord and as such were obliged and legally empowered to enforce the owner’s property rights. They were the instruments of the law in these slum courts and tenements. Ellen Chase provided a detailed breakdown of the legal process and costs involved in evicting tenants in her advice to prospective rent collectors.¹¹ The collector, she affirmed, was responsible for the personal delivery of notices to quit and her reading these notices before the tenants made them legal tender. She could hire a broker to distrain the tenants’ possessions in order to recover the debt, or if a broker was not employed she could appear in court herself, as what Margaret Nevinson termed a ‘prosecutrix’ on behalf of the landlord.¹² Once the court had issued a summons to the tenants in question, the collector had to be on hand to supervise the warrant constables in the emptying of the premises and to receive the keys from them.

Of course working-class landladies – a still much under researched area of female employment – had occupied this instrumental place in the enforcement of property law throughout the nineteenth century.¹³ Middle-class women’s exercise of these legal rights was however, much more of a novelty. Unlike the District Visitor or Charity Organisation almoner, the rent collector had the right to improve the homes of her tenants, empowered as she was to sanction repairs and redecoration on behalf of the landlord. And if this

¹¹ Ellen Chase, *Tenant Friends in Old Deptford* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1929) p. 216

¹² Nevinson, 1926 p. 95 recalled ‘The Thames Police Court in those days was an unpleasant place even for a “prosecutrix”. I remember the disgust with which I stood for the first time in the lobby, jammed tight amongst the crowd; the cases of assault and beating were being heard, and I was about the only woman present with unbandaged head and unbruised eyes.’

¹³ See Lenore Davidoff, ‘The Separation of Home and Work? Landladies and Lodgers in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century England’ in *Fit Work for Women* ed. Sandra Burman (London: Croom Helm, 1979) pp. 64-98. Hill described the typical landlady to the London poor as ‘a struggling, cheated, much worried, long suffering woman...never able, in short to use the power given her by her position to bring order into the lives of her tenants: being, indeed, too frequently under their control’ Octavia Hill, ‘Blank Court; or Landlords and Tenants’ *Macmillan’s Magazine* 24 (1871) 456-465 (p. 456)

environmental stimulus did not bring about an improvement in the inhabitants, then she had the right to evict them, moving them out of her sphere of duty. The moral imperative of altruism was therefore underpinned by the agency of property rights. In implementing the law on behalf of the owners in this way, the lady rent collectors drew upon a resource of power that was very different from the notion of innate feminine authority over domestic space. They were the speaking subjects of an encoded system of rights as well as the embodiment of the lady's duty in the homes of the poor.

Rent collecting was a form of philanthropy that was both narrow in focus and all encompassing in its hopes of social transformation. The collectors' efforts were concentrated upon small clutches of housing, tucked away in back streets and alleys, or limited to one of the new blocks, purpose built by philanthropic housing trusts from the 1870s onwards. The work was localised, enabling the collector to come to know the various charities, authorities, schools and employers in the area. On the face of it, the collectors' duties were simply to ensure that these pockets of philanthropy scattered throughout the capital were relatively well regulated and pleasant places to live in for their few hundred inhabitants. But the work gained profound significance from the reciprocal relationship assumed to exist between individual character and environment in the dominant moral discourse of the late nineteenth century.

In a moment of self-doubt, Beatrice Webb felt 'rather depressed by the bigness' of the work that lay before her as a rent collector: 'When I look at those long balconies and think of all the queer characters – occupants and would-be occupants – and realize that the characters of the community will depend on our personal power...I feel rather dizzy'.¹⁴

Within the logic of class relations in late nineteenth century London, the lady rent

¹⁴ Norman and Jean Mackenzie eds., *The Diaries of Beatrice Webb* vol. I (London: Virago, 1982) 13th March 1885, p. 133

collectors were to be vital in the regeneration of the individual moral characters of the poor. Through gradual improvements in their surrounding environment, the tenants would be stimulated to self-improvement; as the lady rent-collectors whitewashed stairs and hallways, stopped up leaks, the tenants would rise from the darkness of the 'residuum' and set about decent, clean and sober lives. Through managing property the lady rent-collectors were to take responsibility for the ordering of working-class characters, taking and re-making their identities.

I want to place these new aims of housing management in the context of late nineteenth-century imaginings of the future of metropolitan class relations – something that has tended to be neglected in recent accounts of Hill's life and work.¹⁵ Although rent-collecting on this basis became known quite rightly as 'the Octavia Hill scheme', the innovation was part of a widespread intellectual preoccupation with the proper nature of urban society; Hill's success was in providing a defined role for middle-class women within such schemes of social regeneration. The philanthropic projects and social investigations of the late nineteenth century were as Gareth Stedman Jones and Eric Hobsbawm have noted, modes by which the relatively new and unstable class of intellectual professionals identified themselves as indispensable figures in the capital. Drawing upon the rhetoric of a feudal system of class relations, social activists characterised themselves as a new urban squirarchy, re-forging close, proprietorial relationships between 'rich and poor', taking the role so neglected by absent landlords.

'The old word "landlord"', wrote Octavia Hill in 1871, 'is a proud one to many an English gentleman, who holds dominion over the neat cottage', but in the city,

¹⁵ Although Lewis, 1991 does situate Hill in the context of late nineteenth century social thought, some more recent accounts have (over) emphasised an essentialist reading of her work as stemming from her sex and being, by and large, about gender. For example, 'Octavia chose to live all her life with other women, she worked with women and, to a large extent in her housing and social work, she worked for women, and she placed immense importance on her relationship with women in all these spheres'. Morrell, p. 92

Where are the owners, or lords or ladies, of most courts like that in which I stood with my two fellow workers? Who holds dominion there? Who heads the tenants there? If any among the nobly born, or better educated, own them, do they bear the mark of their hands? ...There are in those courts as loyal English hearts as ever loved or revered the squire in the village, only they have been so forgotten.¹⁶

In the face of this division between owners and tenants, Octavia Hill and her fellow workers stepped in to rehabilitate the identity of the landlady. Displacing the image of the working-class tyrant or harassed drudge, Hill sought to create a new place in the city for the educated woman as *landlady*. She was to take possession of urban spaces, defining herself as a new and necessary presence as she attempted to improve the landscape and figures around her.

The case study of the lady rent collectors of Katherine Buildings that follows suggests just how important such work was in the definition of the identity of the urban professional lady. Although Hill's prescriptions for rent collectors were frequently shown to be ineffective, the practice of managing the tenants and the attempt to improve their character and moral tone effected a shift in the discourses of gender and class that the collectors used to characterise their own place in the late nineteenth-century city.

ii. Katherine Buildings, Whitechapel, 1885-1890

Katherine Buildings was...a long double-faced building in five tiers; on one side overlooking a street; on the other, looking on to a narrow yard hemmed in by a high blank brick wall forming the back of the premises of the Royal Mint. Right along the whole length of the building confronting the brick wall ran four open galleries, out of which led narrow passages, each passage to five rooms, identical in size and shape, except that the one at the end of the passage was much smaller than the others. All of the rooms were 'decorated' in the same dull red distemper, unpleasantly reminiscent of a butcher's shop. Within these uniform, cell like apart-

¹⁶ Octavia Hill, 'Blank Court; Or, Landlords and Tenants' *Macmillan's Magazine* 24 (1871) 456-465 (p. 456)

ments there were no labour saving appliances, not even a sink and water-tap!¹⁷

Beatrice Webb's evocation of Katherine Buildings in 1926, forty years after her involvement in the design, management and daily running of these working-class dwellings, is nothing if not bleak. With its tenants written out of the picture in her recollection, it stands as a criticism in stone of the 'sacrifice of decency' and true benevolence in favour of low rents and sanitary buildings, a deadening shell that no-one could call home.¹⁸ It works in Webb's autobiography as a milestone at the beginning of the rapid social improvements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: a marker of just how far municipal socialism had taken London.

But with the tenants in residence this first philanthropic edifice of the East End Dwellings Company, opened in January 1885, served as the focal point around which a group of middle-class women re-made themselves as subjects of the modern city.¹⁹ This corner of the Minories, pressed between the Mint and St Katherine's Docks was not just the centre of intense philanthropic enterprise and consequently a space of freedom from certain social conventions for its lady collectors. It was also a site where 'ladies' came to question the dominant discourse of gender, seeking new narratives of sexed identity through confrontations with their tenants, 'the aborigines of the East End'.²⁰ The records of the lady rent-collectors are filled with excitement and anxiety that this place and this time was where it was all just about to happen – socialism, free thought, new unionism,

¹⁷ Webb, 1926 p. 225

¹⁸ Webb, 1926 p. 226

¹⁹ The East End Dwellings Company was established in 1883. In line with several other charitable trusts in the 1880s, the company built new blocks of housing for workers – a divergence from Hill's own theories of urban reform that supported the regeneration of old cottage homes wherever possible. The company's chair and founding director was the philanthropist Edward Bond (1844-1920), an individualist involved in the Charity Organisation Society and a former associate of Octavia Hill. Webb attributed Hill's breakdown and absence from her work from 1877-1879 to her unrequited love for Bond. See Webb's diary 28th May 1886, Mackenzie 1982, p. 170

²⁰ The phrase is Webb's from her diary, 4th June, 1885, Mackenzie, 1982 p. 134

degeneration, mass unrest, moral regeneration – all were possibilities. This pioneer outpost of middle-class philanthropy was on the threshold of a new era.²¹ Lady collectors, their gentlemen friends from Toynbee Hall and the tenants themselves, cast around for new ways to understand and place themselves in this shifting landscape.²² The fault lines appeared in those very characteristics of gender and class that the lady collectors were supposed to embody and enforce. In the attempt to manage the tenants in this unstable setting the lady rent collectors turned away from the conventions of middle-class femininity, instead taking and using the stories of the working-class men and women around them to authorise their identities as workers.

The lives, work and interactions of the tenants and lady collectors of Katherine Buildings are remarkably well documented.²³ Beatrice Webb reviewed her work in the buildings in her diary and letters as well as in her autobiography, recording her shifting impressions of the East End poor during the year she worked in Whitechapel.²⁴ Margaret Nevinson devoted considerable space to her years rent-collecting in Katherine Buildings in her memoirs *Life's Fitful Fever*.²⁵ In the spring of 1886 Margaret Harkness, an aspiring novelist and socialist activist moved into the buildings for three months 'while working on 'Exchange and Mart' for the purpose of observation'.²⁶ Encouraged and supported in her literary aspirations by her distant cousin Beatrice Webb, Harkness went

²¹ The phrase is in part a reference to Isabella Ford's novel in which a pair of young ladies discover freedom and socialism in mid 1880s London, *On The Threshold* (London: Edward Arnold, 1895)

²² For the history of Toynbee Hall see Standish Meachum, *Toynbee Hall and Social Reform, 1880-1914: The Search for Community* (London: Yale University Press, 1987)

²³ One historian uses Katherine Buildings as an instance of the possibility of recording near total community history, see Rosemary O'Day, 'How Families Lived Then: Katherine Buildings, East Smithfield, 1885-1890' in *Studying Family and Community History* Vol. 1 ed. by Ruth Finnegan and Michael Drake (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) pp. 129-67. O'Day also includes useful reproductions of the architects plans for the buildings.

²⁴ By far the best analysis of the significance of this period to Beatrice Webb's life and work is to be found in Deborah Epstein Nord, *The Apprenticeship of Beatrice Webb* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1985) pp. 115-152

²⁵ Nevinson, 1926, see Biographical Index

²⁶ BLPES Coll. Misc. 43 'Record of the Inhabitants of Katherine Buildings, 1885-1890'

on to publish her first novel, *A City Girl*, the following year, a cautionary tale of sex and socialism set in a lightly disguised 'Charlotte Buildings'.²⁷ Although not involved in the philanthropic management of the buildings, Harkness's novel and her letters to Webb provide valuable side lights on the interactions of tenants and collectors.

However, the central sources for this case study are Ella Pycroft's letters to Beatrice Webb – letters that provide what was initially an almost weekly record of this lady manager's struggles with the tenants. Webb assisted Pycroft in the daily management of Katherine Buildings, from December 1884 until her father's illness forced Webb to give up the work in November 1885. According to her autobiography, Webb had approached the work from the outset as an experiment in social science and empirical observation, an 'occupation well fitted to form part of my apprenticeship as a social investigator'.²⁸ She judged Pycroft favourably after their first meeting: 'Decided business capacity and strong will and placid temper... Very anxious for work and indifferent to life! We shall get on well and are anxious to have no other workers on the block'.²⁹ Pycroft herself was the daughter of a country doctor, who had come to London in 1883 and taken up the salaried position of agent of the East End Dwellings Company in Katherine Buildings after a year working at a girls club in Soho.³⁰ In the scattered records of Pycroft's career, colleagues and interviewers emphasised her practicality and

²⁷ John Law [Margaret Harkness], *A City Girl: A Realistic Story* (London: Vizetelly, 1887); see also Biographical Index

²⁸ Webb, 1926 p. 223. Despite this rather pragmatic reading of her philanthropic work in *My Apprenticeship*, the month before Webb decided to take up rent collecting, her diary contains a long excerpt from the work of Auguste Comte. 'Our harmony as moral beings is impossible on any other foundation but altruism. Nay more, altruism alone can enable us to live in the highest and true sense. To live for others is the only means of developing the whole existence of man...' and she concludes in a letter to her father 'that analysis and criticism are rather poor stuff to live on...one ought to go in for practical work if one is ever to do anything for one's fellow mortals'. She marked this turn towards altruism as the redemption of herself after her bruising failure to elicit a proposal of marriage from Joseph Chamberlain. 8th September, 1884 Mackenzie, 1982, pp. 119-20

²⁹ Webb diary entry, 16th January, 1885, Mackenzie, 1982 p. 129

³⁰ I have been unable to verify Pycroft's involvement with the Soho club. The only source that mentions it is an interview published in the *Queen*, October 7th 1893, p. 620.

organisational skills, her 'pluck' and energy in her dealings with people.³¹ The two women agreed that their differing skills and interests in the work, theoretical and practical, made them perfectly complementary in the running of the buildings; 'EP takes the lead in management, BP in observation – both of them are professionally ambitious' commented Webb.³²

Pycroft and Webb corresponded with each other frequently after Webb's resignation, Pycroft supplying Webb with accounts of her own dealings with the inhabitants of the buildings. Pycroft's own observations on philanthropy and the social scene in the East End in the 1880s form one side of what was obviously an ongoing dialogue between herself and Webb, who, as her diaries reflect, was at the time frustrated by her enforced retreat from the capital and was eager to remain engaged with the social and political issue of the day. Whilst working together at Katherine Buildings, the two women had started to compile a complete record of the inhabitants of this East End Dwellings Company tenement, listing the occupation, income, religious affiliation and family characteristics of all tenants, searching for the social facts that would provide the answer to the question of East End poverty.³³ Pycroft continued to update this record after Webb's departure, concurring with Webb's conviction of the importance of personal

³¹ See Biographical Index for details of Pycroft's subsequent career

³² BLPES Coll. Misc. 43 'Record of the Inhabitants of Katherine Buildings' p. 97. A second hand – presumably Pycroft's – has underscored the word 'both' and added an exclamation mark. Perhaps this is an indication that Pycroft, who had to earn her livelihood, was motivated a little less by sheer ambition than the wealthy Webb.

³³ Despite Octavia Hill's assertions of the need for rigour, discipline and accuracy in the work of female rent collectors she saw little purpose in Pycroft and Webb's record keeping: 'I met Miss Octavia Hill the other night at the Barnett's...I asked her whether she thought it necessary to keep accurate descriptions of the tenants. No she did not see the use of it. 'Surely it was wise to write down observations so as to be able to give true information?' I suggested. She objected that there was already too much 'windy talk'. What you wanted was for men and women of action to go and work day by day among the less fortunate. And so there was a slight clash between us, and I felt penitent for my presumption, but not convinced.' Webb diary 12th May 1886, Mackenzie, 1982, p. 168. Emma Cons, the manager of Surrey Buildings, South London Building Company also told Webb she 'kept all particulars as to families in her head'. Webb diary 12th August 1885, Mackenzie 1982, p. 136

observation and statistical enquiry in addressing the problems of the poor. And it seems that Pycroft's letters helped Webb continue her sense of involvement in the development of social science and her own craft. Just as Webb's design for the record of the inhabitants of the building had sought answers as to the social questions of the day through the accumulation of facts and personal observations, so Pycroft's detailed letters about the tenants provided matter for Webb to analyse and extrapolate from. It was from these sources that Webb drew together her first published article, 'A Lady's View of the Unemployed at the East' in 1886.³⁴

So much of this particular narrative has to do with the time and geography of mid 1880s Whitechapel, with its philanthropic ventures and drifting population, that I want to place it carefully in its context.³⁵ As Margaret Nevinson indicated in her memoirs, Pycroft was an integral part of 'our little band of pioneers', a community of middle-class men and women centred round Toynbee Hall who

.... all met in Whitechapel with some ill defined notion of sharing what we had of knowledge, art, music and beauty with those who had so little, some had definite theories of social reform but on the whole few of us were prigs or self righteous, we were not above laughing at ourselves and our ideals.³⁶

For three years Pycroft lived in Wentworth Dwellings, workman's flats in Whitechapel where Nevinson and her husband also lived. It seems to have been a sociable colony of young philanthropists of both sexes, who enjoyed the relaxing of conventions that went with the exercise of duty in the East End. 'East End manners amuse me', Pycroft wrote to Webb in July 1886, and this was not an anthropological assessment of the strange

³⁴ Beatrice Potter, 'A Lady's View of the Unemployed at the East' *Pall Mall Gazette* 18th February, 1886

³⁵ For a useful insight into East End life in the 1880s, see W J Fishman, *East End 1888: A Year in a London Borough Among the Labouring Poor* (London: Duckworth, 1988); an exemplary 'history from below' of life in model dwellings in East London is Jerry White, *Rothschild Buildings: Life in an East End Tenement Block, 1887-1920* (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1980)

³⁶ Nevinson, 1926 p. 79

customs of the poor, but rather a perception of the uncertainty of social and sexual boundaries between middle-class philanthropic workers in Whitechapel.

Mrs Nevinson told me Mr Price wanted to call on me but was shy, I said I should be very glad to see him, one really shouldn't stand on ceremony with one's fellow workers – The next day I went to play with his children at Stepney & after walking home together he pressed me to go & dine with him and his cousin (also a young bachelor) & the invitation was repeated today – Pretty well for a shy young man I thought! – I didn't go.³⁷

This seemingly trivial incident is worth inclusion because it emphasises the confidence and self-possession that came with the heterosocial fellowship of social workers in Whitechapel. It further underlines my argument in the previous chapter that such freedom was achieved through a re-definition of sexed identity – Pycroft could be glad to see Mr Price whilst their relationship was an asexual one, as 'fellow workers'. Once the invitation to dine was issued however, Pycroft judged that the game had shifted to one with more conventional understandings of gender and propriety. Temporary and contingent as this heterosocial space of working fellowship in the East End was, it served as a site where middle-class women could re-define who they were in terms of work and duty, loosening the bounds of what it meant to be a lady.³⁸

But this community, this 'first colony' and 'small centre of help in the midst of this mass of wretchedness' as Hill termed the workers around the Barnett's at St Jude's Church, only existed as a space of freedom because of the perception of the poverty of the

³⁷ BLPES Passfield 2/1/2/7 folios 455-555 Ella Pycroft to Beatrice Webb 6th July 1886. Nevinson lists W.A. and A.R. Price as part of the Whitechapel community around Toynbee Hall in the mid-1880s. The children Pycroft mentions are of course not Price's own in the biological sense, but presumably members of a club or class he ran.

³⁸ I would like to argue that a similarly important story should (and remains to) be told about the re-shaping of middle-class masculinity in the same setting – in particular concerning concept of *service* so frequently deployed by workers at Toynbee Hall.

inhabitants of Whitechapel.³⁹ It would be misleading to tell any story of these philanthropists that treated the ‘residuum’ and the working poor as a mere backdrop to the personal dramas of the middle-class civilisers. What was so unusual about this particular group of social activists, and what I want to argue was so significant in forming the narratives of this case study, was that their lives were lived in such proximity to the objects of their attention. And further, the reformers perceived themselves as an isolated colony of outsiders in an almost exclusively working-class district. Katherine Buildings itself was home to what Webb termed ‘a rough lot’, mostly casual labourers in the nearby docks and markets, and a lower class of tenants than those accepted by either the Peabody Trust or Octavia Hill.⁴⁰

To some extent this situation fuelled the imperialistic narratives of heroism, colonisation and civilisation that were so prevalent in accounts of social work in the 1880s and can be seen in the writings of Pycroft, Webb and Nevinson.⁴¹ But what I want to look at first is a reversal of this power dynamic: the unsettling of the social activist’s sense of self as a result of living and working with the tenants in Whitechapel. Webb decided after a few days residence, ‘I could not live down here. I should lose heart and become worthless as a worker’, disturbed by the close press of the ‘coarse’ crowds around

³⁹ Octavia Hill, *Letter Accompanying the Account of Donations Received for Work Among the Poor During 1872* (London: James Martin, 1873) p. 5

⁴⁰ Webb diary 4th June 1885, Mackenzie, 1982 p. 134. For statistical analyses of the occupations of the tenants of Katherine Buildings taken from Webb and Pycroft’s records see O’Day, 1994; BLPES Passfield 2/1/2/7 Ella Pycroft to Beatrice Webb 9th February 1886 ‘I...got about five minutes talk with Miss Octavia Hill the other day...they have a much higher class of tenants than ours & the cleanliness made me jealous’.

⁴¹ The most explicit reliance on such metaphors of empire to delimit the task of the social reformer in the capital is to be found in William Booth, *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (London: Salvation Army, 1890) where the writer (sometimes suggested to be the journalist WT Stead) describes the East End in conjunction with excerpts from Stanley’s *In Darkest Africa*. But the trope of empire is virtually omnipresent in sensationalist writings about the East End in the 1880s; see also Gill Davies, ‘Foreign Bodies: Images of the London Working Class at the End of the Nineteenth Century’ *Literature and History* 14 (1988) 64-82; Ruth Livesey, ‘Explorers in the Abyss: Women, Philanthropy and Domestic Orientalism in London, 1880-1914’ (unpublished master’s dissertation, University of Warwick, 1995)

her.⁴² And even Margaret Nevinson felt her self-possession intruded upon eventually by the ‘uncouth ugliness, the noise, the smells, the sense of countless multitudes of men, women and children all jammed together in indecent proximity’ and ‘above all the triumphant march of vermin’.⁴³ Maintaining self-control and the necessary boundaries of distinction between the lady philanthropist and her poor was a challenge for the rent collectors of Katherine Buildings – a challenge frequently issued by the tenants themselves to the identity and authority of the ladies.

In Octavia Hill’s many writings on the theory of rent-collecting as a means to social and moral reform there were two aspects of the work which she repeatedly stressed as central to the success of such projects. The first technique rested upon the vision and visibility of the lady collector: her enforcing her monitoring eye upon the consciousness of the tenants, ensuring that even in her absence the tenants lived up to standards that it would not upset her to see. Taking the position of ‘Queens’ each over their own domain, the collectors were to be visible figureheads of authority, of distant but benevolently inclined power. The collectors were to see everything, but to be seen only as ciphers – the embodiment of moral superiority that was the lady.

The second method for success, according to Hill, was making the tenants aware of the collector’s proprietorial feelings towards them: ‘You know they are yours; they know it; and as the years go on this sense of attachment will deepen and grow’.⁴⁴ Hill worked with an idea of interested friendship and patronage between collectors and tenants: the latter were to know that they were subjects in the lady collector’s domain. It was through these two processes, visibility and the possessive bond, that the lady rent

⁴² Webb n.d. diary entry [November 1886] Mackenzie, 1982 p. 185

⁴³ Nevinson, 1926 p. 102

⁴⁴ Octavia Hill, *Letter to My Fellow Workers* (London: Houseboy Brigade, 1879) p. 5

collector was to change her tenants for the better. Yet despite Hill's constant re-iteration of the mutual and reciprocal relationship between collector and tenant, she never gestured towards the possibility that these two techniques could work both ways and that the lady collector herself could be affected by her own visibility or altered by the tenants' proprietorial feelings towards her.

In the summer of 1886, Ella Pycroft became only too aware of how every action of hers was scrutinised by the tenants. Far from functioning as the ideal moral exemplar – a lady and little else – to her tenants, she was shocked to discover through Margaret Harkness and Beatrice Webb that the inhabitants of Katherine Buildings had cast her in a romance. She confessed in reply to Webb that she was not offended 'but much obliged to you for telling me the gossip' among the tenants concerning her relationship with Maurice Eden Paul who ran the boy's club in the building, 'And I would be very glad if Miss Harkness would tell me if she hears any more of it'.⁴⁵ It appears that she at least, viewed Paul as nothing more than a friend at this time and was 'rather glad, for that reason only' that Paul had given up running the boys' club at the buildings, removing himself from the scrutiny of the tenants, who had presumed that Pycroft had gone away to marry him during her holiday in the previous month.

Though claiming not to be in the least surprised by Harkness's information, with a breathless rush of self-consciousness Pycroft added,

...because when the boys' club was going & I was going to the men's club twice a week, Mr Paul & I were always at the Buildings at least twice a week together & of course we went home together, & besides he had got into a habit of coming to my room there & I noticed once or twice that if Mr Paul were at the B^{lgs} without my knowing it Mrs Roadknight [the caretaker's wife] used to tell me so the minute she saw me as if it were of the utmost importance that

⁴⁵ BLPES Passfield 2/1/2/7 Ella Pycroft to Beatrice Webb 25th June 1886. Maurice Eden Paul (1865-1944) son of the publisher, Kegan Paul, was a resident of Toynbee Hall and training in medicine at this time. He and Pycroft became engaged two years later but this was broken off in 1890. Paul went on to become a well-known translator and member of the International Socialist Movement.

I should know.⁴⁶

It is safe to assume that Pycroft was less obliged to Margaret Harkness's diligent powers of observation when *A City Girl* was published the following year, containing as it does, a discussion among the tenants concerning the lady rent collector's 'follower' who runs the boys' club in 'Charlotte Buildings'.⁴⁷ The *Charity Organisation Review* concluded 'Lady rent collectors may learn [from *A City Girl*] some of the impressions which they create in the minds of their clients' and added, 'We hope that they will not be shocked to find that they are suspected of 'followers' in the shape of the gentlemen whom they persuade to start clubs and reading rooms'.⁴⁸ Some, it seems, were less shocked than others, already conscious of their visibility to the tenants.

The construction of Katherine Buildings displayed the tenants' lives all too clearly to the onlooker. Exterior staircases and balconies meant every movement of every individual could be seen from the yard below. Taps, sinks and water closets were on the end of each balcony to be shared by all, and led to a continual sociable clustering round these facilities, much to the lady collectors' disgust.⁴⁹ No one could pass through the buildings unseen. But this was no Panopticon.⁵⁰ The buildings were certainly not designed with principals of disciplinary surveillance in mind and the visibility of the

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Harkness, 1887 p. 73: 'She told him stories about the lady collectors, gave him quaint descriptions of their ways and doings and described their 'followers' as she called the philanthropic gentlemen who conducted clubs and reading rooms in the buildings. It amused Mr Grant to have an East End opinion on West End manners and customs.'

⁴⁸ Anon. 'Review of *A City Girl*', *Charity Organisation Review*, August 1887 (p. 317)

⁴⁹ In one of her more pessimistic moments, Webb recorded 'The buildings...are to my mind an utter failure. In spite of Ella Pycroft's heroic efforts, they are not an influence for the good. The free intercourse has here, as elsewhere in this dismal mass, a demoralizing effect...The meeting-places, there is something grotesquely coarse in this, are the water-closets! Boys and girls crowd on these landings – they are the only lighted places in the building – to gamble and flirt. The lady collectors are altogether a superficial thing,' Webb diary, n.d. entry [winter, 1885] Mackenzie, 1982 p. 186

⁵⁰ Jeremy Bentham, *The Panopticon Writings* ed. Miran Bozovic (London: Verso, 1995); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* trans. by Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977) pp. 195-228

tenants' lives on the balconies was the result of strict economy in land use, deplored by the collectors and abandoned in future designs by the East End Dwellings Company. It was impossible for the lady collector to watch over the tenants' doings whilst unseen herself and subject them to her disciplinary gaze.

Whilst Ella Pycroft had the right to look into her tenants' homes and lives in the exercise of her duties, she discovered to her discomfort that the tenants had no scruples about looking back at her just as directly. This unsettles the simplistic formula of power often associated with theories of surveillance and social control – watcher infinite, watched nil. For although, as we shall see, Pycroft used her knowledge about the tenants' lives to shore up her authority in the buildings, to manage and amend the inhabitants, they too had (albeit limited) power to affect her sense of freedom and self-determination. Pycroft's commitment to her work, demonstrated by her renting a room in the buildings where she stayed a few nights a week and carried out her daily duties, exposed her and her visitors to the levelling gaze of the tenants as they climbed the stairs. It was forced onto Pycroft's attention that just as she drew together narratives from domestic disputes, changed employment, marriages, births and deaths in order to complete her 'Record of the Inhabitants of Katherine Buildings', so too the tenants read a life story from her movements around Whitechapel and recorded it in their daily conversation. Pycroft simply could not be merely that embodiment of authority, the lady, under such circumstances.

The tenants of Katherine Buildings refuted the hierarchical logic of class and gender that underpinned Hill's theories of rent collecting. Refusing to accept Pycroft and her fellow workers as benevolent despots with a rightful claim to the building and

proprietary concern over their lives, the tenants attempted to reverse this relationship.

Webb argued that

From the outset the tenants regarded us, not as visitors of a superior social status still less as investigators, but as part of the normal machinery of their lives, like the school attendance officer or the pawnbroker; indeed, there was a familiarity in their attitude, for they would refer to one or other of us as 'my woman collector', a friendly neighbour being given the status of 'the lady next door'.⁵¹

In opposition to Hill's tenet 'they are yours; and they know it', the tenants marked their sense of ownership over the rent collectors rather than the other way round, designating the property managers as a local service, 'my woman collector'. The tenants refused to bestow the authority of ladyhood let alone queenship upon the collectors. This parallel with the pawnbroker and school attendance officer was not as belittling as it might seem, however. Both of these figures exercised a great degree of control over lower working-class families, enabling the periodic survival strategies of debt and credit in one case and regularly monitoring family respectability in the other. Both represented the local face of larger systems of power and control. The origin of Webb's wry amusement at this comparison, I want to suggest, lay in its desecration of the identities of class and gender presumed to lie at the heart of philanthropic rent collecting.

Powerful though pawnbrokers and school attendance officers were on a local level, they were certainly not considered ladies and gentlemen of the middle and upper-middle classes and neither were their occupations elevated by the language of altruism and philanthropic theory. They were instead necessary authorities made familiar by frequent meetings and regular visits, impersonal representatives of an administrative system. And this is precisely why the accepted formulas of the lady's philanthropic

⁵¹ Webb, 1926 p. 224

authority simply did not work in Katherine Buildings. It was impossible to maintain that sense of distance, elevation and innate superiority which Hill placed at the centre of her theories of ‘personal influence’ and moral reform, when the tenants insisted on reading the collectors much more pragmatically, as a familiar intrusion and occasional resource.

Writing to Webb concerning a particularly ‘trying’ day at the buildings Pycroft complained ‘I was pursued & bullied by two people on whose goods I had made the broker levy a distraint, till I didn’t know whether I weren’t the brute they seemed to think me. I think perhaps in one case I was’.⁵² The tenants asserted their own claims to control over the buildings and what they perceived as their right to use the collectors as a local service providing them with access to charitable relief.⁵³ When this attitude to the management came into conflict with the legal duties of the lady collectors it was an unsettling experience. The opinions and perceptions so freely expressed by the tenants about them and their work forced the women social activists to reassess themselves. The rent collectors were led to question the justice of their actions and the basis of their authority.⁵⁴ In this sense the tenants were far from the powerless, misguided figures that appear in Hill’s writings, waiting to be observed, then stimulated into full social subjectivity by the philanthropist. Instead the tenants constantly struggled to assert their rights over, rather than duties towards, the lady collectors and their property and in doing so called for change in the collectors themselves.

⁵² BLPES Passfield 2/1/2/7 Ella Pycroft to Beatrice Webb 14th August 1886

⁵³ BLPES Passfield 2/1/2/7 Ella Pycroft to Beatrice Webb 26th February 1886: ‘You will be amused to hear that Mrs Downs has discovered that I have a fund of “hidden feeling”, I have shown it by sending Canon Bradby to them with some S.R.D. [Society for the Relief of Distress] money – but she said though she “would have made bold to ask Miss Potter for any help she wanted, she didn’t think that I had so much kindness in me”’. It is clear from the ‘Record of the Inhabitants’ and Pycroft’s correspondence that the collectors of Katherine Buildings were instrumental in recommending cases to the Charity Organisation Society, East End Emigration Society and Mansion House Fund among other metropolitan charities.

⁵⁴ Pycroft worried about the propriety of some of her interventions in the tenants’ lives. After helping a tenant open her husband’s locked box to look for money after he had gone off ‘in a temper’ Pycroft scribbled in the spaces between the lines of her report of this incident to Webb ‘do you think I was at all justified?’. BLPES Passfield 2/1/2/7 Pycroft to Webb 15th July 1886

iii. ‘It was a Proud Conquest’: Ella Pycroft and the Management of Gender in Katherine Buildings

The outward and visible signs of government were manifest to the tenants in the form of lady collectors. Several times in the week ladies arrived at the Buildings armed with master-keys, ink-pots and rent books. A tap at the door was followed by the intrusion into the room of a neatly clad female of masculine appearance. If the rent was paid promptly the lady made some gracious remarks, patted the heads of the children and went away. If the rent was not forthcoming the lady took stock of the room...and said a few words about the broker.⁵⁵

So far I have outlined the ways in which the almost daily struggle for authority in Katherine Buildings undermined Octavia Hill’s theories of rent collection and disturbed the self-possession of the lady collectors. But Ella Pycroft, Margaret Nevinson and Miss Coe who replaced Beatrice Webb, all worked at the Buildings over a period of several years, and their efforts continued to be commended by the directors of the East End Dwellings Company. They managed to maintain order and keep rent arrears to a minimum, whilst providing the necessary profit margins for the Company to expand and develop its work. The lady rent collectors did, after all then, find the resources to manage the tenants of Katherine Buildings and succeed in asserting their authority. What I want to examine now are the strategies that Ella Pycroft used in maintaining this control. Using her letters to Webb, I will explore how Pycroft represented herself and her day to day relations with the tenants – representations in which the language of gender was central to her possession of power. Pycroft’s narratives are full of surprising inversions of the conventions of gender, deployed to reinforce the authority of this middle-class woman over the working-class men and women of the buildings.

⁵⁵ Harkness, 1887 pp. 9-10

We have already seen in the previous chapter how both Pycroft and Webb seized upon the asexual model of the ‘Glorified Spinster’ to represent and understand their own lives and work in the city. Both women were conscious of the novelty of their self-defined position as workers first and foremost, and both celebrated their celibacy as part of an active mission for the wellbeing of society. In Pycroft’s case her departure from the norms of middle-class femininity was even more sharply marked by her occupation of a salaried position as agent of the East End Dwellings Company. This move away from the conventions of the lady’s place as a purely altruistic volunteer, a move much condemned by Hill, led one worker to compare Pycroft to the pioneer female doctor, Sophia Jex Blake. But Pycroft angrily dismissed such a comparison with a woman who struggled for a place in a middle-class male establishment, adding ‘I am thankful that my name isn’t Susan or Sophia Jex Blake & that I am not a female doctor – why should I be compared to one?’⁵⁶

Instead of aligning herself with a woman who could – with slight anachronism – be identified as a feminist and part of a broader movement to advance the social place of middle-class women, Pycroft preferred to see herself as a woman with ‘masculine’ qualities. Within such an understanding of gender Pycroft was an exceptional individual surrounded by a few similarly distinctive souls, an interesting aberration in the nature of sexual identity, but not a politically conscious subject seeking to reform ideas of what a middle-class woman could be. Her ‘somewhat abnormal but useful qualities’ of a ‘masculine faculty’ and ‘woman’s temperament’ as Webb put it, promised such a strong

⁵⁶ BLPES Passfield 2/1/2/7 Pycroft to Webb 4th March 1886. Miss Aitchison, a new, elderly and ‘soft-hearted’ volunteer sent to Pycroft by the Barnetts was not favoured: ‘I do not like her, she told me the ‘power’ in my forehead reminded her of Miss Susan Jex Blake (or is it Sophia)’.

woman 'a great future' in the 'solution of social questions', but had little relation to the political formulation of the 'woman question'.⁵⁷

What I want to argue is that these very 'masculine' qualities so frequently recorded in comments upon Pycroft and her achievements were to a great extent the product of her fraught encounters with the tenants of Katherine Buildings. In the attempt to police class and maintain the hierarchy of property rights, Pycroft turned away from that specifically feminine notion of citizenship and duty that underpinned the theory of rent collecting. Pycroft's portrayal of her daily activities in Katherine Buildings was far from the feminine ideal of the visible moral example present in Hill's writings. Although Hill's published works often included accounts of initial resistance from her tenants, Hill represented such recalcitrance as rapidly awed into submission by her quiet logic and silent authority. Pycroft's letters to Webb, on the other hand, are in the style of a heroic adventure, with moral authority the result only of a continual process of confrontation and conquest; a guerrilla warfare against the predominant 'rough set', which was waged on the open staircase, in the club room and in the courtyard.

The earliest surviving letter from Pycroft opens with a dramatic account of 'a very exciting week at the Buildings' in which 'there was a regular mutiny last Tuesday at a concert'. At this concert, attended by only the male inhabitants of Katherine Buildings, herself and one lady friend, Pycroft attempted to intervene and prevent the men singing 'vulgar' songs and was hissed at by the audience for her efforts.⁵⁸ Nevinson recalled the rent collectors' regular distress at finding that the tenants 'liked a comic song, however bad, better than our well meant attempts to elevate their tastes' at concerts in the

⁵⁷ Norman Mackenzie ed. *The Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978) Beatrice to Richard Potter November 1885

⁵⁸ O'Day speculates that Pycroft's lady friend present at the concert, 'Miss Black', was the social activist and novelist Clementina Black, but I have been unable to find any evidence for this potentially very interesting connection.

buildings, and recorded ‘the boredom [the tenants] felt at being compulsorily uplifted’.⁵⁹

But for Pycroft, the issue was less about conflicting cultures than the challenge such behaviour posed to her control over the buildings.

The following day Pycroft met with the offending tenants in order to re-establish her authority.

I made them wait till the boys were gone & then we talked for an hour & ten minutes, & I made them all acknowledge that it was possible to laugh without having vulgar jokes or worse, & that we ought to try & raise the tone of the people & so on; & made them clearly understand that the club room was let to me & I'd have no disputing my authority in it, & we parted with smiles all round. It was a proud conquest. No doubt I can manage them in future, but they must never have a loose rein again, it has all been my fault for trusting them too much - Mr Paul declares he will never let me be alone at a concert again, & I should have been thankful for him last Tuesday, but it is not a bad thing to have fought my battle & won alone.⁶⁰

As with the night before, Pycroft was alone in confronting the men of the buildings and enforcing her rights. It is this isolation of the lady social reformer amid a crowd of working-class men – the ‘low set’ of the buildings – that marks the singularity of Pycroft’s encounters with her tenants. For in contemporary writings concerning middle-class women’s place in social work and in histories of the subject alike, there are no accounts of such anomalous configurations of gender, class and authority. There was no available model to validate Pycroft’s management of a mass of men – no contemporary imagining of the forcible re-moralisation of working-class men by a lady. Rent collecting and district visiting were of course written about as forms of philanthropy that brought the lady into an instrumental relationship with both poor men and women, but such heterosocial encounters were always contained within an approach that dealt with ‘the

⁵⁹ Nevinson, 1926 p. 97

⁶⁰ BLPES Passfield 2/1/2/7 Ella Pycroft to Beatrice Webb 9th February 1886

family as the true unit in social case-work'.⁶¹ Pycroft stood alone as the figure of authority and representative of the landlords against the demands of a group of men.

In representing this minor crisis in her letter to Webb, Pycroft displaced the values of feminine ethics with masculine heroics. She drew herself as a lone knight against the darker forces of Katherine Buildings, quelling 'mutinies', fighting 'battles' and achieving a 'proud conquest' over the restive men she had to manage. To enforce her authority over the group, Pycroft adopted a militant martial identity, fighting for order in this strange colony stranded in the East End. For the cross-class, cross gender struggles that characterised Pycroft's daily work were simply unrepresentable within the Ruskinian logic of feminine authority, of 'sweet ordering' and gentle 'rule' that Hill had used to defend her projects. Pycroft was forced to look beyond the identity of the lady to find the resources to manage the tenants. But at the base of this move away from representations of femininity was Pycroft's assurance of her legal standing as leasee of the club room. It was her reassertion of the power of property rights that enabled her to rule out the possibility of the working-class culture of the music hall finding its way into Katherine Buildings, and allowed her to perform triumphant militant masculinity in her letters to Webb.

Both Webb and Pycroft took particular interest in the male tenants' engagement with political movements in the East End, noting their reaction to the debates on Free Trade or socialist and anarchist speeches in Victoria Park. In February 1886 Pycroft wished that Webb was still working in the Buildings, for 'how you would enjoy arguing with them' at the men's club, asserting a 'lady's view' of the situation over the restive

⁶¹ 'The Family as the True Unit of Social Casework' *Charity Organisation Review* June (1890) 233-241. The outline syllabus of social work training at the Women's University Settlement published in the *Charity Organisation Review* in February 1893 pp. 63-64 included preparation for work with the 'sick', 'girls', the destitute 'women and children' and the 'aged', but certainly not able-bodied men.

mass of working-class men. Pycroft's own management of and reaction to her male tenants' political interests and activities are particularly interesting given the masculine formulas she herself drew upon to characterise her authority in the buildings. Unlike Webb, she seems to have avoided political debates with the men and looked for alternative methods of quieting their demands. For Pycroft's letters record her repeated attempts to domesticate this aspect of her male tenants' lives and her efforts to read potential political unrest among the men as a homely affair that could be limited and contained by the lady collector's actions. Even in relating her disagreement with Maurice Paul concerning the appropriate metaphor to characterise working-class political activity in the East End, she tamed the prospect of an explosive reaction amongst working-class men around the issue of Free Trade, by re-viewing it as a feminine and tractable situation.

Mr Paul says we are sitting on the safety valve of a boiler,
& there'll be an explosion soon; which idea is not at all original
& does not express my feelings about it. I feel as if a big pan too
heavy to lift were on the point of boiling over & I was hunting
around for something cold to put in to stop it.⁶²

Rejecting Paul's industrial imagery of working-class unrest, Pycroft transferred the vision of class conflict to the domestic space, reading the prospect of a working-class uprising in the East End as something she could find the antidote for amongst the resources that lay around her.

Bringing the male tenants home was not just a rhetorical strategy for Pycroft's management of conflict in Katherine Buildings. She used the tools of domesticity as a means of re-focussing the men's attention away from the political articulation of working-class consciousness. In one instance she playfully recorded her success in finding that 'something cold' to put in the boiling pan of political unrest. The means of subduing this

⁶² BLPES Passfield 2/1/2/7 Ella Pycroft to Beatrice Webb 19th February 1886

turbulence was the explicit feminisation of the working-class men so stimulated by contemporary political debates. Mr Downs, a tenant of the Buildings, became extremely excited after hearing Charles Bradlaugh speak on the issue of social justice in Victoria Park, and in Pycroft's view 'his [Downs'] head was quite turned... he talked like a child who has just opened his eyes for the first time to the injustice of the world'. After a week of listening to Downs' 'wild talk' of Bradlaugh's promises of a future of social equity, Pycroft was concerned when Mrs Downs, rather than her husband, came to pay the rent. Accordingly, Pycroft called in on the Downs family to make sure that he had not run off or taken to drink in his excitement at a new world view.

I thought there must be mischief brewing & I went to see - But to my joy Downs was quietly sitting on the bed making a flannel shirt to go hopping in, & needlework had soothed him, as they say it does women, it was so funny; so I sat down & taught him & his wife to herringbone, an art they had long wished to learn & there was peace.⁶³

Although Pycroft by no means prescribed needlework as a cure for the massed threat of 'outcast London' her reading of this incident does suggest that she worked with certain assumptions concerning domesticity and femininity. Focusing Downs' energies on needlework 'soothed him', distracted his attention from public debate and potential activism, to the fabrication of a peaceful home. This returns us to Hill's pronouncements on the value of a true home for the poor. In the ideal 'model dwelling' tenement, the noisy, public, communal nature of the life of the urban poor, was to be replaced by

quite respectable working-class families...whose well ordered,

⁶³ BLPES Passfield 2/1/2/7 Ella Pycroft to Beatrice Webb 21st August 1886. In her later role as organiser of domestic training at the LCC Pycroft 'quietly observed' to an interviewer 'that, as a matter of fact, classes in cookery for boys were being held, and that personally she entertained no prejudices regarding the sex to whom such knowledge should be imparted. She only thought it desirable that, as we still needed dinners, clothes, and other such material things, some persons of whatever sex should learn how to make them'. Margaret Bateson, *Professional Women on their Professions: Conversations Recorded by Margaret Bateson* (London: Cox 1895) p. 94

quiet little homes, behind their neat little doors with bright knockers...now begin to form groups where respectable citizens live in cleanliness and order. Under rules they grow to think natural and reasonable, inspected and disciplined, every inhabitant registered and known, School Board Laws and law of the landlord or company regularly enforced...is developed a life of law, regular, a little monotonous, and not encouraging to any great individuality, but consistent with a happy home life, and it promises to be the life of the respectable London working man.⁶⁴

The domestication of working-class men was seen as an important part of the re-moralisation of the urban poor in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The ‘true home’, developed under the discipline of the middle-class female rent collector, was to draw men away from the public fora of pubs, clubs, streets and parks, to the private environment and ambitions of their own families. But Pycroft’s intriguing account of her needlework lesson with Downs foregrounds the cross grained nature of the deployment of such a discourse of gender by the ‘Glorified Spinsters’ of late nineteenth-century social action. For the ascription of gender is so unstable in her account – needlework, Pycroft wrote ‘soothed him, as they say it does women’. There was a double distancing at work here, as Pycroft refused to identify herself either with those nameless ones who insisted that needlework was an occupation best suited to female mental health or with the ‘women’ subjected to such prescriptions. Whilst asserting her own identity through paid public work and ‘masculine ambitions’, Pycroft continued to associate the domesticisation of working-class men’s lives with their potential moral and social regeneration. She excepted herself from the prescriptions of femininity whilst using such discourses of gender to enforce order in Katherine Buildings.

⁶⁴ Octavia Hill ‘The Influence of Model Dwellings on Character’ (1892) repr. in *House Property and its Management: Some Papers on the Methods of Management Introduced by Miss Octavia Hill and Adapted to Modern Conditions* ed. Edith Neville (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1921)

iv. Taking Stories, Re-shaping Lives

The records of the lady rent collectors at Katherine Buildings reflect their awareness of the competing models of social reform and regeneration that were so visibly at work in the East End of the 1880s. Disturbed by the tenants' political engagement and excitement, the collectors tried to formulate their own analyses of the problems of unemployment, poverty and immorality and to relate these to their personal experience and observation of the tenants of Katherine Buildings. In her letters to Webb, Pycroft drew comparisons between Hill's and her own methods of building management, criticised frankly Henrietta and Samuel Barnett's sectarian selection of volunteers and provided her opinion of Peter Kropotkin's writings and those of the Social Democratic Federation journal, *Justice*. Each approach was held up against her perception of the tenants and praised or found wanting according to its fit with her view.

I should like to think socialism possible, but I can't manage it...
I am coming to see more and more that it is useless to try & help the helpless, that the truly kind thing is to let the weak go to the wall & get out of the strong people's way as fast as possible. And yet in individual cases it is so hard to act up to one's knowledge - I am trying to bolster up a woman in Kath. B^{dgs} now who has been half starved, & she will come back from a Convalescent Home to which she is going pretty strong - & then it will begin all over again - & I know (or think I do) that if I had left her to die, it would have been shorter misery for her, & there would have been one less to struggle for food here. And I half feel as if I were doing wrong to help her - & yet I couldn't help it - I wonder if in the next generation people will be strong enough to crush their compassionate feelings & act wisely.⁶⁵

Caught on the cusp between the idea of social action as an individual gesture of compassionate sensibility and the model of a strict professional science applied for the good of society, Pycroft troubled over the solution to the problems she saw before her. Her resort to the grim formula of Spencerian laissez-faire was one shared by Webb during

⁶⁵ BLPES Passfield 2/1/2/7 Ella Pycroft to Beatrice Webb 21st August 1886

their joint work in Whitechapel. Both women were sceptical of the environmentalist theory of the regeneration of character that underlay rent collecting. Both saw the only possible solution, the only way round the doctrines of Social Darwinism and degeneration, to lie in a scientific approach to their occupation, gathering information about the tenants and logging every detail about their lives. Rather than seeking a solution in the improvement of the environment of Katherine Buildings, Webb and Pycroft turned to the life stories of the tenants themselves, looking for patterns and clues, transformations and analyses that could be applied to society as a whole.

Although Octavia Hill insisted upon the importance of the rent collector's intimate knowledge of each tenant's character in order to effect moral reform, what Pycroft and Webb sought in their work was a clearly different mode of knowledge. Whilst Hill depicted her knowledge of each tenant's life history as a means of assessing how best to stimulate them individually into better behaviour, Pycroft and Webb recorded their information as fragments that would provide an overall answer to the problems of poverty and pauperism. Their interest lay not so much in individual characters, as in the massified categories and types of nascent social science: the unemployed, the casual labourer, the habitual drunkard, the widow with dependent children.

The 'Record of the Inhabitants of Katherine Buildings', designed by Webb and completed by Pycroft, still stands as a testament to the women's belief in the value of collecting such information. Meticulous in its detail, the record worked as proof of professionalism, making Pycroft and Webb's distinct from the housing managers Emma Cons and Octavia Hill, who saw no purpose in such tabulation. The lives of the tenants were broken down by occupation, income, religion, marital status, and place of birth, followed by a brief sketch of the tenant's character and behaviour. When Pycroft was

forced to act unwillingly as a referee for her tenants' applications for charitable relief, she carefully recorded the sums received by each tenant, assessing whether such aid helped individuals in the long term.⁶⁶ She used the results of this collection of social 'facts' in her debates with both the male tenants of the Buildings and her peers on the value of relief. This collection of working-class life histories was a tool of authority for both Pycroft and Webb, who used its contents as a means of defining themselves as the new and necessary female experts on the problems of the modern city.

Beatrice Webb received a lesson in the ethics of the use of such social research from the tenants after the publication of her first and tellingly titled, article 'A Lady's View of the Unemployed at the East' in February 1886. The novelty value of a lady's authoritative view on such a subject was no doubt an incentive for the *Pall Mall Gazette's* editor, W.T. Stead to publish what is a fairly standard individualist piece, condemning the proposal of public works to relieve unemployment in London. Drawing on knowledge gleaned from her 'business connection with tenants and applicants' in Katherine Buildings, Webb argued 'as one who had tried to gain employment for men of this class – and, what is far more difficult, tried to make them accept and keep it' that 'the loudly proclaimed "right to work" is only too often translated in their minds as the right to work when, how, and as much as they like'. In line with contemporary theories of urban degeneration, Webb further concluded that London itself had the effect of creating 'from genuine working material a leisure and parasitic class' that populated the buildings and beyond.

⁶⁶ BLPES Passfield 2/1/2/7 Ella Pycroft to Beatrice Webb 19th February 1886: 'Nagle senior was the first to apply for relief at the Mansion House, &, much against my will, I had to say that his story was true'. The 'Record of the Inhabitants of Katherine Buildings' logs every penny of charitable assistance that the collectors were aware of the tenants receiving.

Ella Pycroft and Maurice Paul immediately took the article to the boys' club in Katherine Buildings where the latter made 'Gilburn read it aloud to the boys, & great were the discussions thereon'.⁶⁷ Over the following week, Webb's paper caused a 'commotion' in the buildings and Webb clearly 'doubted our wisdom in showing the paper to the tenants'. One tenant, Joseph Aarons,

was specially angry at your saying that the Buildings were 'designed & adapted' for the lowest class of workmen – partly because he will take 'low' to mean 'disreputable', & partly because he shares our feelings about the construction of the B^{lgs}⁶⁸

Aarons' outrage at his former collector's use of his and the other tenants' life stories to come to these conclusions led him to write to Webb, forcing her to address his objections. Unfortunately this letter, though catalogued in the Passfield collection, is now missing.⁶⁹ But its existence sheds light on the discomfort and sense of betrayal that the tenants felt at their former collector 'mapping out the conquered land of social life' and giving the lady's elevated expert view using their cumulative stories of struggle and the search for work. These stories, gathered in a project avowedly based on bringing the classes closer together, Webb used to lift herself away from personal relationships of female philanthropy and secure her place in the ranks of the professional 'brainworkers'.

But one entry that stands out in the 'Record of the Inhabitants of Katherine Buildings' through its very oddity, suggests a stranger story of the identifications of gender and class at work amongst these women social activists. It seems in part a shared joke, which contrasts it with the contents of the rest of this rigorous testament to female professionalism. But read against the other entries and Webb's article distilled from such

⁶⁷ BLPES Passfield 2/1/2/7 Ella Pycroft to Beatrice Webb 19th February 1886

⁶⁸ BLPES Passfield 2/1/2/7 Ella Pycroft to Beatrice Webb 26th February 1886

⁶⁹ BLPES Passfield 2/1/2/8 folios 566-67 Joseph Aarons to Beatrice Webb [missing]

sources, it reveals much about the double-edged way in which women social activists took and used the narratives of gender and class that were before them to shape their own identities.

No. 97 taken with No. 98 Nov. 1885 - May 1886
 Ella Pycroft Rent Collector of K. Buildings
 Beatrice Potter ditto shares the two rooms.
 Ella Pycroft b. Devonshire, daughter of physician (single woman).
 Came to London 1883 in search of work.
 B. Potter, daughter of timber merchant, born in Gloucestershire,
 parents North Country. Came to London for family reasons & with
 the hope of work (single woman). Income [illegible]
 In religious opinions they are doubtful & differing. Energetic &
 punctual in professional duties - not absolutely accurate in accounts.
 B.P. especially deficient. E.P. takes the lead in management. B.P.
 in observation. Both of them are professionally ambitious.⁷⁰

This entry is an obvious pastiche of the formula the rent collectors applied to the tenants of all the other rooms in the Buildings. It has exactly the same structure, breaking down the inhabitants' lives into positivist facts concerning their occupations, places of origin, reasons for moving out of or into Katherine Buildings, religious backgrounds, income and conduct.⁷¹ In effect, Webb turned her quest for personal observation and statistical enquiry inwards, onto herself and Pycroft. The results of this inversion of the surveillant gaze are very interesting when read in the context of the entire volume. First by far the majority of entries in the volume are concerned primarily with male tenants as heads of households or single men: there are comparatively few entries for female principal tenancy holders. Secondly the statement 'came to London in search of work' was one never used by Pycroft or Webb with reference to female tenants: it is a phrase which

⁷⁰ BLPES Coll. Misc. 43 'Record of the Inhabitants of Katherine Buildings'

⁷¹ The formula is also close to the one deployed by the London C.O.S. which Webb had worked for briefly in 1883; for further discussion of the significance of these C.O.S. 'case histories' see below pp. 196-199

appears extensively throughout the book, but applied exclusively to men save this one instance.

By drawing on the subsistence driven narratives of working-class men, indeed that very migratory practice that Webb criticised in her first published article, Pycroft and Webb were able to give a familiar form and comprehensible structure to their own life histories.⁷² They could tell a story of themselves that validated their experiences of struggle to find rewarding employment: they identified themselves as workers. This identificatory practice certainly did not extend beyond textual alignment to political activism at this point in either woman's career.⁷³ The problems of unemployed and casual labouring men served as an acceptable pretext for middle-class women to involve themselves in professionalised philanthropy and social investigation. And working-class men's quest for work in such conditions of economic hardship provided these two women with a formula that naturalised their own desire for useful employment. Women social activists could perform masculinity and play with cross-class identifications in the East End, whilst securing their status up West as lady experts on the 'parasitic' class of Whitechapel.

⁷² Potter, 'A Lady's View of the Unemployed': '...the great majority of the 'unemployed' are those who have been pressed out of the working ranks in provincial towns and country neighbourhoods and who have thoughtlessly drifted to the great centre of odd jobs and indiscriminate charity. For the individual who is disabled either through lack of inclination or from want of power for persistent and worthwhile work, for the ne'er do well, the discontented and the genuinely unfortunate, London seems to offer the best chance of getting a bare subsistence with comparatively little effort.'

⁷³ Interestingly, Webb's first declaration in her diary of her political conversion, 'I am a socialist', is preceded by exactly such a recognition of political and social alignment: 'For a career in which ability tells – the bitter cry of the nineteenth century working man and the nineteenth century woman alike'. Mackenzie, 1982 p. 322

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Taking and Making Characters: Women's Work in the London Charity Organisation Society

In the autumn of 1891 the social investigator Clara Collet published an article about the novels of George Gissing in the *Charity Organisation Review*.¹ Such an extensive consideration of fiction was unusual for this periodical, concerned as it was with the defence and dissemination of the Charity Organisation Society's practices and principles of 'scientific philanthropy'. But Collet (and I would argue, most of her readers) saw nothing odd in this particular juxtaposition of an essay on the merits of a leading contemporary novelist with summaries of the latest Royal Commission Reports and lists of donations received by the Society.² Noting the 'common aspiration' among philanthropists that 'the rich and poor may learn to know each other better' Collet argued that 'readers of the *Review* who wish to know about the working classes more particularly will find few better instructors than Mr George Gissing'.³ Before, or even, instead of reaching out for such knowledge through 'intimate acquaintance' with the actual poor, readers could find themselves 'more in touch with their fellow men through the medium of a... great novelist'.

Collet proceeded to exemplify Gissing's 'intimate knowledge of the habits of life and thought of working people' by extracting and listing five descriptions of working-

¹ For Collet's life and work see Biographical Index

² Gissing himself thought the article 'rather good' when Collet sent a copy to him in May 1894 at the start of their correspondence. See Pierre Coustillas, *London and the Life of Literature in Late Victorian England: The Diary of George Gissing* (Sussex: Harvester, 1978) p. 304

³ Clara Collet, 'George Gissing's Novels: A First Impression' *Charity Organisation Review* October 1891 375-380 (p. 375)

class women's dress from his novels: '1) "The boots on her feet were sewn and patched into shapelessness; her limp straw hat had just received a new binding"; 2) "She wore a dark dress trimmed with velveteen, and metal ornaments of primitive taste gleamed amid her hair"' and so on.⁴ At first glance these anonymous sketches of female apparel seem far from that intimate knowledge of the life and thought of working people that Collet promised her philanthropic readers. But Collet prefaced her selection of these examples with a little piece of pedagogy that made the connection between appearance and working-class life and thought, and her article and practices of the C.O.S. itself explicit. 'To take the question of dress' she wrote, 'it is surprising to find how much of *character* can be conveyed in a simple and detailed description of dress' and focusing her readers' attention on the examples provided, Collet asked them 'what should we deduce from the following?'.⁵

Collet was not simply marking the accuracy of Gissing's representation of working-class life in London and praising his technique of constructing literary 'characters'. More importantly, she was asking her readers to engage in a process of exegesis. Using Gissing's descriptions they were to piece together a morally evaluative narrative – a narrative that was character itself in its dominant nineteenth-century sense. Taking the signs of dress, manners and surroundings, the readers were to unfold a coherent set of judgements and probabilities: whether the individual was decent, sober and honest, or degraded, feckless and untrustworthy; if she exerted herself to live in respectable independence, or lived in expectation of doles from strangers – in short if she possessed 'character' or not. After attending Collet's lecture on Gissing in February 1892, Olive Garnett noted in her diary that 'while admitting that the novels were

⁴ Collet, 1891 p. 377

⁵ Collet, 1891 p. 377 (my emphasis)

pessimistic & depressing [Collet] thought them founded on actual experience & reliable as pictures'. From these reliable pictures 'Miss Collet drew a very healthy moral which one could see was founded on her own experience – a working one'.⁶ The picture of an individual was made to tell a morality tale of more significance than the plot, which Collet dismissed as 'of little importance in a consideration of [Gissing's] novels'.⁷ By reading character rightly – a technique gained through experience – it was possible to map out destiny in a way that made the circumstances of action and plot quite unnecessary. For character itself contained and determined an individual's fate, so by unfolding such moral characteristics the experienced reader could foretell the future: the resolution of the narrative was merely the working out of the deeper telos of character.⁸

The significance of Collet writing such an article for the *Charity Organisation Review* becomes abundantly clear immediately after she asked her readers to engage in this character diagnosis.

A district secretary of the C.O.S. said recently that Gissing's novels reminded him of the best specimens of case papers. None of those who have read 'The Nether World' will consider this a high compliment to anything but the case papers; but it is quite true that it would be possible answer nearly every question in our case papers with regard to many of the characters in 'The Nether World' and 'Thyrza'.⁹

The peculiarity of Gissing's intensely pessimistic imagining of the inescapable destinies of slum dwellers being compared to the bundles of interviews, reports and references that

⁶ *Tea and Anarchy: The Bloomsbury Diary of Olive Garnett, 1890-1893* ed. Barry C. Johnson (London: Bartlett's, 1989) 28th February 1892 (p. 63). For Garnett's work with the C.O.S see below pp. 192-193 and Biographical Index.

⁷ Collet, 1891 p. 377

⁸ Stefan Collini, 'The Idea of Character: Private Habits and Public Virtues' in *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850-1930* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991) pp. 91-120 connects A. C. Bradley's praise of Shakespearean tragedy 'for not allowing extraneous or accidental elements to weaken "the sense of causal connection of character, deed and catastrophe"' to the centrality of this idea of character in nineteenth-century thought.

⁹ Collet, 1891 pp. 377-378

comprised the C.O.S. case papers on applicants for aid is apparent to us now. There was, however, no irony in this self-congratulatory contrast of Gissing's Schopenhauerian visions with the 'best specimens' of the documents of regenerative social case work. For what united the two in Collet's estimation was a particular mode of knowledge and means of narrating working-class life histories.¹⁰ The division between aesthetic cultural product and bureaucratic record simply did not hold, when both (as Collet argued) aimed at making the working-class poor in London knowable to a middle-class readership. Both sets of texts were structured in such a way as to demand a distinct reading practice, be those readers the C.O.S. District Committee members privy to the interviews, references and reports of homes visits in case papers, or the more general novel readership.

In the further examples selected by Collet there are indeed clear parallels with the surviving examples of C.O.S. case papers. Gissing's sketches of employment (or unemployment) histories, of migratory movements over London and familial relations echo the formulaic transcripts produced from the sets of interview questions directed at the applicant for aid in the C.O.S. district offices. And what Collet intimated was that both these texts should be read in the same way – that these lists of externalities should be interpreted to provide the only interiority that the middle-classes could ever ascribe to the poor, that of character. Individual destiny could be read from the smallest objects: boots and hats or pawn tickets and rent books; the intimate spaces of working-class homes yielded up their contents to the gaze of the reader of character and a moral aetiology was traced into these objects – signs of the overdetermined choices of the poor. The rich got to know 'the habits of life and thought' of the poor by piecing together a series of exterior

¹⁰ There is no doubt that just as social investigators recommended Gissing's work as a means for the middle classes to know the poor, so too, Gissing turned to their own writings to structure and inform his representations. Writing to Clara Collet he mentioned 'I have just been reading Charles Booth on Dock & Wharf labour. I want to make use of Pickle Herring St., Shad Thames & that region'. University of Warwick Modern Records Centre MS 29/3/1/4 George Gissing to Clara Collet 27th August 1893.

signs and learning what these signified in terms of moral character. Character in this sense was both the subject of morally evaluative judgements by others and imagined as the product of discerning choices between vice and virtue on the part of the individual.

There are no doubt, more straightforward ways to make the observation that that the idea of character was central to the philosophy and practice of the C.O.S. during the period in question. It is an inescapable conclusion, reiterated as it was in the *Charity Organisation Review*, Annual Reports and other publications well into the early twentieth century. The C.O.S. worker aimed, as Helen Bosanquet put it, ‘to construct a raft for the shipwrecked applicant [for aid] out of the few shreds of character remaining to him, and steer him safely to [the] solid ground’ of long term self support and independence.¹¹ The causes of pauperism and ‘secondary poverty’ were perceived [^]lie in the deficient characters of the poor, and through stimulating and nurturing these individual characters, the C.O.S. aimed to eliminate dependence on Poor Law out-relief and alms.¹² Character determined circumstances and environment and not the other way round: pauperism indicated not so much a bad character as the absence of character itself, loaded as the latter term was with a positive value.

But the reason I want to start out from Collet’s writings on *The Nether World*, *Demos* and *Thyrza* is to broaden the scope of the consideration usually given to this subject in histories of the C.O.S. For this concern with character was not (or at least not

¹¹ Helen Bosanquet, ‘Methods of Training’ *Charity Organisation Review* August 1900 103-109 (p.108)

¹² During the mid-1890s in response to the experiments of the Progressive Poor Law Guardians of Poplar who dispensed generous out-relief to the able bodied poor, the C.O.S. Annual Report of 1895 restated the society’s fundamental creed: ‘Much has been written on the subject of pauperism which we find difficult to accept. A school has risen among us which wishes to take the sting out of pauperism by removing its disabilities. It is argued that a pauper will cease to be a pauper if only he is better fed and clothed and allowed to retain his vote. But in our eyes food and dress are merely accessories; the essence of pauperism is that it is a condition of dependence. Only by becoming self-dependent can men cease to be paupers, and to make them free men again their moral force must be strengthened...It is forgotten that the resources of the State depend in the long run on the exertions of its citizens, and, what is even more important, that its control is external, over men’s actions only and not over their thoughts.’

just) an attempt to impose bourgeois codes of morality and enforce the Smilesian values of self-help, duty and thrift upon the mass of the poor that was limited to C.O.S. theorists.¹³ The idea of character, as Stefan Collini has so well illustrated, was one that occupied a privileged place in political and social thought throughout the second half of the nineteenth century.¹⁴ Anxieties concerning the development or decay of character under differing social systems are almost as visible in the early Fabian essays as they are in the writings of Helen and Bernard Bosanquet or Herbert Spencer. Alongside duty and altruism, character structured imaginings of how the subject should relate to the social and which qualities reformers should seek to protect and develop.¹⁵

The constitutive elements of this idea of character were, I would argue, invariably coded as masculine: independence; the rational subjugation of weak impulses and lower desires to a higher ideal; the sacrifice of short term pleasures for distant security; a sense of constant watchfulness over one's self-development and continual striving for success at work in order to provide for the centre of duty and love, the domestic space. In short, it is difficult to invoke the idea of character without also making some reference to the cognate late nineteenth century ideal of 'manliness'.¹⁶ Character, in the positive morally evaluative sense of term, was the narrative of the self-made man – and I am not just

¹³ Stedman Jones, 1971 p. 271 argues that the 'general aim' of C.O.S. activities was 'to impose upon the poor a system of sanctions and rewards which would convince them that there could be no escape from life's miseries except by thrift, regularity and hard work'

¹⁴ Collini, 1991 pp. 92-93

¹⁵ 'The Teaching of Social Science' *Charity Organisation Review*, May 1909 pp. 278-282 comprises a report of 'A conference convened by the School of Sociology and Social Economics' at which sociologists and practical workers gave their views on 'the teaching of social science in relation to service of the community'. Alongside potted summaries of addresses by Bernard Bosanquet and J.S. Mackenzie, L. T. Hobhouse is quoted as concluding that 'the aim of all sociological training should be to enable the student to estimate the value of ideas and conceptions in all the regular phrases and terms, such as responsibility, duty, independence, character'. He added finally a statement that would have been incomprehensible to female philanthropic workers a few decades earlier, 'these [concepts] cannot be analysed or understood without some philosophical training'. (p. 281)

¹⁶ See Collini, 1991 pp. 185-189; J.A. Mangan and James Walvin eds. *Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800-1940* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987)

referring to the tale of humble beginnings, progress and public achievement in spite of a lack of patronage that was the dominant structure for life histories of such men from the mid-century onwards. Rather, I want to emphasise the significance of this idea in terms of identity formation: the idea that the manly man made his self, by himself, through the process of exercising a constant vigilance over his habits and thus controlling the shades of his character over time. The public ideal was, as Collini notes, in many ways different for women from this fundamentally non-relational imagining of the subject. In this chapter I am going to explore how a certain group of women nevertheless constructed themselves as the necessary experts on the subject of character in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century London.

What I want to argue here is that alongside this widespread intellectual concern with character there developed a set of practices, of ways of reading and interpreting others, in which middle-class women were seen to excel. The constituent parts of this practice were neither new in themselves nor as areas of expertise for the lady. But the valorisation of character in social and political discourse pulled together these disparate strands and gave middle-class women the basis of a new power and authority, a new stake in the social. When private habits came to be seen as ineluctably connected to public virtues, united as they were by the rôle of character, then middle-class women gained the status of makers of citizens through their efforts as educators in domestic manners and morals and readers of respectability.¹⁷ Of course, this connection had formed an important

¹⁷ Collini, 1991 pp.109-111 draws comparisons between the eighteenth-century language of virtue, politeness and sociability and that of nineteenth-century character to illustrate the very different valencies of public and private existence in these two imaginings of the virtuous subject. 'In the civic humanist tradition, it is a precondition of political liberty that those classed as citizens should be able to devote their energies to participation in public affairs, and hence should be at least partly free of the need to engage directly in productive activity, while at the same time luxury is an agent of decay precisely because it diverts men's concerns from the public to the private spheres. In character-talk, the individual is not primarily regarded as a member of a political community, but an already private (though not thereby selfish) moral agent whose mastering of his circumstances is indirectly a contribution to the vitality and prosperity of his society...In both traditions there is an abhorrence of apathy: it is the obverse of their common strenuousness. But

political argument for feminists as diverse as Hannah More and Mary Wollstonecraft from the turn of the century onwards in relation to the moral education of children. However, the particular currency of the idea of character in political discourse in the 1880s and 1890s amid the debates on the role of the state in the care of the poor gave this claim a fresh urgency. Through the work of the London C.O.S. in particular, middle-class women were drawn into the practices of transcribing and reshaping the characters of the poor as part of a bureaucratic system designed to bring about major social transformation. The practice of individual social case work, codified and deployed by the C.O.S., was a means for middle-class women to state their own importance as public characters of political significance, through the process of reading, writing and reforming the characters of the London poor. They made their own characters in relation to those of the urban residuum: unlike the manly, self-made man, the public virtues of middle-class females at the turn of the century were formed in dialogue with the fragmented characters of the poor.

i. Social Case Work and the London Charity Organisation Society

The history of women's involvement in the practical aspects of C.O.S. work has undergone a number of radically different readings over the last fifty years. The first generation of historians of British social work seemed to shudder at the vehemently anti-interventionist, individualist philosophy of the Central Council of the Society, whilst praising the practice of long term visiting, inspection and documentation – the social case work – of women workers in the local District Committees. A.F. Young and E.T. Ashton and Kathleen Woodroffe saw the latter as the progenitor of mid twentieth century social

whereas in the civic humanist eschatology apathy leads to a decline from public to private, in Victorian individualism apathy, in the form of lack or weakness of character, is more likely to figure as a the force propelling the otherwise self-maintaining individual into a state of dependence and in *that* sense into the public sphere.'

work, and accordingly detached practice from philosophy in order to be free to characterise the C.O.S. as the body that professionalised and developed social case work.¹⁸ At the same time, these historians represented the philosophy of the C.O.S. as a quite distinct and unfortunate error of judgement in regard to the true causes of poverty in London; a throwback to a mid-nineteenth century vision of social relations. The formula used by these historians was one of practical success and idealistic failure, with women's authority as social case workers an unquestioned triumph, whilst the central directives of the abolition of out-relief, the dismissal of the 'undeserving' and the centralisation of all metropolitan charities were merciful failures.

However, as Gareth Stedman Jones so rightly pointed out in *Outcast London*, the practice and philosophy of the C.O.S. simply cannot be, and were never, considered as separate projects espousing different aims.¹⁹ Social case work, and in particular the practices of home visiting, the long term aftercare of applicants for aid by volunteer workers and the aim of involving even the more distant family members of 'cases', emerged from the Society's prime concern to re-establish needy individuals as self supporting characters.²⁰ In Stedman Jones's analysis, this united approach cast women case workers as the enforcers of ill-informed bourgeois judgements on the fearful spectacle of 'outcast London'. C.O.S. workers were, in his view, class actors who by their very social position – that of 'self-made men' – were the most ill equipped to perceive the

¹⁸ A.F. Young and E.T. Ashton, *British Social Work in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1956); Kathleen Woodroffe, *From Charity to Social Work in England and the United States* (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1962); for further examples of this argument see also Madeline Roof, *A Hundred Years of Family Welfare: A Study of the Family Welfare Association (Formerly Charity Organisation Society) 1869-1969* (London: Michael Joseph, 1972); Charles Loch Mowat, *The Charity Organisation Society, 1869-1913: Its Ideas and Work* (London: Methuen, 1961) is a little more circumspect in condemning the society's individualism, written as it is by a descendent of CS Loch, C.O.S. Secretary

¹⁹ Stedman Jones, 1971 pp. 256-298

²⁰ This suggests a uncomfortable genealogy for present day social work, which still employs so many of the terms of methods developed in the late nineteenth century, c.f. the current journal *Social Casework*.

true needs of the London poor and therefore resorted to imposing the middle-class strictures of character through individualistic case work instead.²¹

But more recent critics have come to question whether the C.O.S. was successful even in this respect.²² In her study of the Society, Jane Lewis attributes its failure to achieve major social transformation to the lack of intellectual engagement on the part of its women visitors ‘whose personal work with poor families was so important as the vehicle for implementing the new ideas about charity as a means of achieving social progress’. Lewis suggests that these women case workers did not, or could not, grasp the theoretical principles that underpinned the Society’s work and ‘got no further’ in their understanding ‘than a generalised sympathy with the poor or a sense of what was owed to the poor by the better off’.²³ As I suggested in chapter three, the altruistic impulses that Lewis dismisses in this way are far from narrow and uninteresting for an exploration of women’s involvement in social action. In this chapter however, I want to take issue with Lewis’ conclusions concerning women case workers in the London C.O.S.

This first took the form of a question as I read through the only surviving examples of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century case papers – those selected and preserved by the Hammersmith and Fulham District Committee. If women workers in the District Committees did not understand the political theory of the central C.O.S., then what did structure their reports, visits and references concerning needy applicants? After reading through these sets of perceptions and the classification of the ‘Deserving’ and the ‘Undeserving’, my initial conclusion was that these judgements were authorised and informed by an understanding of codes of gender and class so obvious and so naturalised

²¹ Stedman Jones, 1971 p. 270

²² Robert Humphreys, *Sin, Organised Charity and the Poor Law in Victorian England* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995)

²³ Jane Lewis, *The Voluntary Sector, The State and Social Work in Britain: The Charity Organisation Society/ Family Welfare Association Since 1869* (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1995) p. 25

as to be almost invisible. Women workers for the C.O.S. read the bodies, family structures and homes of the poor, detecting confidently the presence or absence of respectability and what was termed 'helpability'. They wrote reports for the Committees that relied upon a shared understanding of the moral significance of over-dressed daughters, unemployed sons, unmade beds and beer on the table. The accuracy of middle-class women's perceptions of these markers was beyond question for the District Committees because they were part of the 'natural' skills of being a lady.

Tracing a brief history of the development of social case work in the C.O.S. suggests that the class (and gender) identity of the case worker became increasingly important over the period in question. The practice of social case work within the C.O.S. was an outcome of the Society's emphasis on the investigation of applicants for aid. In order to avoid the evils of overlapping charity, the clever fraudster and mendicancy itself, no statement given by a man or woman in search of assistance was accepted as it stood. From the foundation of the District Committee system in the early 1870s, working-class male inquiry agents or officers were employed to verify the facts and compile detailed reports on applicants referred to the office. The agent was instructed to convey the true financial and moral situation of not just the individual applicant but also his or her immediate family. This involved the agent contacting the Relieving Officer, local clergy and charitable organisations in order to see if the applicant was already receiving undeclared aid from them, and checking the applicant's statement against those of employers, landladies and neighbours. On the basis of the agent's findings, the Committee would then classify the case as either a deserving one and assistance would be found, or the case would be dismissed as undeserving.

The triumphalism of the Committee when applicants were discovered to be undeserving, or making fraudulent claims, can be read all too clearly in the abbreviated case-histories attached to the early Annual Reports.

Undeserving – Case 303: A Laundry-woman applied for assistance to pay her rent. It was ascertained that she made more than her rent from lodgers, that she had been in receipt of good wages, was very fond of drink and kept a daughter at home in idleness.²⁴

Of course, these reports were primarily aimed at potential subscribers to the District Committees, and the picture of accurate detection and informed selectivity that such case histories provided gave the appearance of value for money. Such was the emphasis on the importance of accurate information that in 1872 it was estimated that the inquiry agent had to make ‘no less than eight visits in each case before it is completed’.²⁵ He would then submit a written report to the Committee, but was rarely allowed to have any other input into the case. The agent’s work, from conducting the initial interview with an applicant to presenting the facts to the Committee, evidently required a high degree of local knowledge, geographical and social mobility. Harry Snell recalled his work as agent for the Woolwich District C.O.S. in the 1890s as ‘an ever flowing stream of cases’ that all had to be dealt with in detail in the office and in ‘daily visits to foul slums and fever-stricken houses’, all for twenty-five shillings a week.²⁶

Within the first fifteen years of the Society’s existence, however, the position and responsibilities of the agents were under question from the central council of the C.O.S.

²⁴ St Pancras District C.O.S. Committee 3rd Annual Report, 1872

²⁵ Hammersmith and Fulham District Committee Annual Report, 1872

²⁶ Lord Harry Snell, *Men Movements and Myself* (London: JM Dent, 1936) pp. 70-71. The Woolwich C.O.S., under the aegis of C. H. Grinling in the early 1890s was highly unorthodox in the view of the Central Council. As the paid inquiry agent, Snell was encouraged both to contribute his opinions on the treatment of cases to the Committee and interview applicants himself – practices frowned upon by this period. The *Charity Organisation Review*, June 1894 pp. 278-279 contains an animated debate among correspondents concerning the propriety of the Central Council’s censure of the Woolwich Committee on the publication of its less than individualist Annual Report.

Not only were the educational levels of these men derided by CS Loch, Secretary of the C.O.S., but their very class identity began to render them unsuitable promoters of the cause of charitable organisation.

In my opinion now as formerly, where this system of Secretary Agent prevails, poor work is often done. Those who call at the office are not treated with as great a consideration as they would be by a gentleman or a lady, and this is not due, I think, to defects on the part of the officer, but simply in a manner to the social difference which usually exists between a Secretary and an Agent, which makes it easier for the former to co-operate with those who have the administration of charity chiefly in their hands.²⁷

In Loch's view, the agents were too socially inept to hold administrative responsibility in the District Offices and were placed increasingly under the authority of educated ladies and gentlemen District Secretaries; salaried workers appointed from 1883 onwards.²⁸ At the same time, the practices of interviewing the applicant and visiting her home which had formerly been the preserve of the inquiry agent were reclassified as tasks most suitable for the lady volunteer.

The initial interview with an applicant, concluded the Annual Report for 1885, was an encounter that required 'much tact' and was 'work for high skill and delicate sympathy and one for which ladies are particularly suited'.²⁹ With patience and encouragement the lady volunteer could extract the necessary facts from applicants more effectively than the inquiry agent, breaking down the prejudices of class in the process. By 1893, H.V. Toynbee argued that the few District Committees that still left all their visiting

²⁷ Statement of C. S. Loch to Special Committee on the Employment of District Secretaries submitted to Council 17th May 1897 London Metropolitan Archives A/FWA/A1/11/1

²⁸ The resolution passed by the Central Council in 1883 read 'That five suitable officers of good education, capacity and address be appointed after careful selection, now or at as early dates as occasion offers, each of which will, with the local committee to which he may be attached, be responsible for insuring thoroughness in case-work, for enlisting volunteers, and for organising charity... That the persons eligible for appointment be either men or women'. By 1897 there were 17 District Secretaries, eight of whom were women. Helen Bosanquet (nee Dendy) was appointed a District Secretary in 1890.

²⁹ C.O.S. Central Council Annual Report, 1885

and case work to the agent had a 'bad effect' on the applicants and conveyed the 'impression that very little personal interest is taken in the work'. It was particularly important that a volunteer case worker visited the applicant's home for 'the conditions and surroundings of the home are among some of the best indicators of character'.

Damning the agents with faint praise, Toynbee concluded, 'however efficient the inquiry officer may be, it must be recognised that there are cases that should not be left in his hands, and some which a lady alone can deal with satisfactorily'.³⁰ As an agent, Snell found the assumption that a male waged worker could not possess the qualities of 'wise judgement, deep sympathy, tact and insight' presumed necessary for this work a 'purely archaic' one and 'not pleasant for the paid workers...to hear'.³¹ But despite his public protest to the Society, it is clear that someone in Snell's position had little chance of overcoming the dominant discourses of class and gender that attributed these skills definitively and exclusively to the lady.³²

The emphasis for the first ten years of the Society's existence had been upon the detection and discovery of the applicant's financial and moral situation, but by the early 1880s this investigative model started to undergo a subtle change that was vital to this new role of women workers. Initially the process had been one of ascertaining a coherent and stable truth about the applicant and their family; a series of facts that could be

³⁰ H.V. Toynbee, 'The Employment of Volunteers' *Charity Organisation Review* June 1893 pp. 225-232 (p. 228) Toynbee himself was initially employed as an inquiry officer by the C.O.S in 1881 on a salary of £53 p.a. With the creation of the posts of paid District Secretaries in 1883, Toynbee rose rapidly in influence and authority within the Society. By 1897 he was the Society's key trouble shooter, sent in as District Secretary to take control of offices which had slipped below the standards required by the Central Council, for a salary of £300 in comparison to the average wage of a male District Secretary of £175 and female, £100. Toynbee replaced C. H. Grinling as District Secretary to the Woolwich Committee in 1894 'with the mandate to restore the society to the severe social orthodoxy which then found favour'. Snell, 1936 p. 73 noted shortly 'he was exactly suited to his task, and he soon brought to an end both the kindlier practice of the society and my connection with it'.

³¹ Snell, 1936 p. 71

³² And yet the irony is that Snell's own life story, from farm hand to MP for Woolwich, conforms precisely to those prescriptions of the power of character to elevate the self-made man so prized by C.O.S. theorists.

delivered to the Committee in order to produce the correct classification and decision. The detection itself was work for servants and it was up to the ladies and gentlemen of the Committee to come up with the rational, scientific solution to the particular case in hand using the agent's reports. But the term 'case' is a significant one here, and it became increasingly important to how C.O.S. workers theorised themselves and their work during the 1880s.

For in a strange fusion of the discourse of medical science and the doctrine of 'personal influence' as an agent of change in philanthropic work, the encounter between the lady volunteer and the case before the Committee came to be seen as vital for the process of reform. Using an explicitly medical model of taking a case history, diagnosing the root cause of individual dysfunction and prescribing a long term cure, the moment of perception and the process of investigation itself was re-viewed as the crucial site of expert intervention. Working backwards from the more general use of the term 'case' as a mode of critical inquiry, a means of illustrating the general from the particular and the use of the individual subject as the objectification of certain principles, C.O.S. writers drew a parallel increasingly between the practices and perceptions of the doctor and the social case worker.

The 'case'! The very word is at first a rock of offence. How one would hate to be 'a case'! In sickness a quivering mass of sensibility, to be only 'a case' within the grim walls of the infirmary!...One is afraid there may be some moral indelicacy when charitable people, if they do not happen to be loving people, turn to vivisection, and go deeply into the merits and demerits of their 'case'. But...whether he likes it or not the sick man *must* be a 'case' to his physician.³³

³³ George Hare Leonard, 'The Committee: Its Utility and Purpose' *Charity Organisation Review* August 1900 116-124 (pp. 117-118)

By the last decade of the century the comparison of the case worker with the doctor had become an accepted part of the claim of C.O.S. activists to professional status.³⁴ The Society came to promote a model of social action in which the act of perception, the reading of the characters of applicants and the writing of these into case histories was in itself a means of transformation and the source of a long term cure.

The mere act of investigation and verification practised by the agent was no longer sufficient. Instead, to draw on Michel Foucault's characterisation of the 'new medical gaze' emergent in the nineteenth century, the perceptual act of the lady volunteer was consistently framed as a 'calculating gaze': 'a gaze that was not content to observe what was self-evident; it must make it possible to outline chances and risks'.³⁵ These techniques of observation relied upon making visible the invisible, opening up the surface to see within, naming causes that had only ever been seen before in their manifestation as symptoms: the gaze penetrated through to the intimate interior in the quest for perfect knowledge. The woman case worker was to deduce the destiny of the applicant from the indicators of character, tracing the aetiology of flaws and weaknesses and administering the remedy in person.

Far from being at odds with the theory of the central C.O.S., middle-class women's work for the District Committees was both the practical expression of and a theoretical resource for the Central Council. The practice of reading and writing characters and piecing together a case history from the bodies and homes of poor

³⁴ See for example H. V. Toynbee 'The Employment of Volunteers' p. 226. 'In order to become a doctor a man must study medicine, and to become a barrister a knowledge of law is necessary, and it is not obvious why an exception should be made in favour of the charitable worker, who has to deal with problems as difficult as ever perplexed doctor or lawyer. Indeed one might say they were almost more difficult; for the doctor and lawyer only deal with one aspect of life, while by those who give their time to the service of the poor nothing which touches on the life of the vast majority of the community can safely be disregarded.'

³⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* trans. A. M. Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1973) p. 89

applicants was the necessary corollary to the individualist social theory of the C.O.S. In most cases participation in this practice did not imply a conscious engagement with the 'new ideas' promoted by the Central Council. But the broad belief that such work was possible and desirable and that middle-class women were best suited to it reflected the underlying structures of thought that assured the ideological dominance of the C.O.S. at the turn of the century. The wives and daughters of those 'self-made men' who underpinned the C.O.S. according to Stedman Jones, were themselves imagined as the makers of characters for the poor. Taking those 'shreds of character' left to the applicant for aid, the woman case-worker was to put them back together, invigorating a weak will, excising moral flaws and constructing a newly resilient individual. Such women were to create independent beings from would-be paupers out of a sense of duty.

ii. **Getting to Know Your District**

This notion of a district as a unity might be made more definite and practical by a study of the particular district in which the student is working, together with its institutions. For our purpose it is generally the Poor Law Union which forms the important area, being more or less governed with one policy with respect to the treatment of the poor. We must be prepared here to meet with blank ignorance on the part of the student, who has very probably never before come into relation with the life of the people and the institutions affecting it. He may have to learn from the beginning the part played in our social economy by trade unions, friendly societies, guardians and vestrymen; relieving officers and sanitary inspectors will be a new order of beings for him, and the Church will acquire a new order of significance, when he learns that its influence is not confined to the spiritual side of life. I would urge that a considerable part of his time should be devoted to exploring his union as if he were Nansen looking for the North Pole.³⁶

With her typical air of the weary professional finding a moment to enlighten neophytes with the complexities of her art, Helen Bosanquet outlined the ways in which C.O.S.

³⁶ Helen Bosanquet, 'Methods of Training' p. 107

workers were to alter their vision of their own localities. Middle-class volunteers and trainee Secretaries were to see London anew as a set of institutions affecting the life of ‘the people’ – the mass population known of but never seen, whose compass needles were set by the workhouse. Behind the familiar facades of smart streets and busy thoroughfares, the C.O.S. worker would come to know pockets of poverty, slum courts whose inhabitants were demoralised by the convergence of diverse charities, all offering ‘indiscriminate alms’.³⁷ Even in West London, the trainee worker would discover a new geography, even Kensington had its own share of ‘outcast London’ hidden away, unknown and unseen by the student in her ‘blank ignorance’, her map filled with white spaces beyond the well trodden routes of shopping and visiting.³⁸ Through the C.O.S., the new worker would come to know her own London district as a social space, governed by institutions and populated by individuals whom she had a duty to re-educate, influence and reform.³⁹

³⁷ A typical denunciation of such indiscriminate and overlapping alms giving comes from the Annual Report of the Central Council for 1890: ‘In the small area of a few streets and alleys there is sometimes a very army of agencies, all independent, all in conflict, not only with sin and wickedness, but often with one another. There may be a kind of courtesy which veils the conflict, but none the less it is there. The clergyman of the parish, and his district visitors and Bible-women; of missions, or the agents of missions, perhaps one or two, perhaps more; the classes and mothers’ meetings; the nurses and the educational agencies – Sunday Schools, and public elementary schools – all these and sometimes others are working over the same ground...as if the promiscuous interference of so many rivals on the same allotment could be anything but fatal’.

³⁸ This representation of extreme poverty just round the corner from the homes of wealthy West Londoners was one deployed in the Annual Reports of West London C.O.S. District Committees, in an attempt to persuading locals that not all efforts needed to be pointed eastwards. The Kensington Housing Trust continued to draw on this visual contrast in standards of living for their 1933 film, *Kensington Calling*. For an analysis of this and other film of early twentieth century housing reform see Toby Haggith ‘Castles in the Air: British Films and the Reconstruction of the Built Environment, 1939-1951’ (unpublished PhD. thesis, University of Warwick, 1998) especially pp. 69-70.

³⁹ Although the majority of C.O.S. regional and District Committees actively encouraged the participation of women volunteers as visitors and committee members, there were of course exceptions still, even as late as the 1890s. A metropolitan visitor to the Leamington Spa C.O.S. Committee in 1895 noted that it had ‘one fatal drawback – that of being a purely male society. The idea of organising the charity of a fashionable residential town, while leaving out the ladies, is simply ludicrous’. ‘A Trip to the Midlands’ *Charity Organisation Review* February 1895 56-60 (p. 59). In the capital the Central Council could exercise more control over the policy of the District Committees in this respect: in 1885 the Districts Sub-committee of the Central Council informed the Battersea C.O.S. that it would provide no further aid and assistance to the district until it had met the condition ‘that ladies be allowed to be members of the committee’ LMA A/FWA/C/A49/9

The London of the C.O.S. worker was a very different one from the experience of the Whitechapel rent collectors examined in the previous chapter. Where the latter perceived themselves as an isolated community in a strange land of the working-class poor, this chapter uses the records of women who worked for their local C.O.S. offices in socially diverse areas. The narratives of these women are structured less by a sense of heroic mission and more by a curiosity about how one's unknown neighbours lived. Their work for the C.O.S. took them to a series of homes all over their districts, and then back to the central office to distil their impressions and give their opinions on the cases in question. The proximity, continuity and urgency of the rent collector's relationship with her tenants that Ella Pycroft narrated so vividly, has no counterpart in the reports, letters, diaries and recollections of women workers for the C.O.S. Instead, these sources reflect an entirely different nature of encounter between the lady philanthropist and the poor: each day a new series of cases to be interviewed, a new set of reports from other agencies to be read and filed in the appropriate set of papers, a new list of addresses to be visited and explored.

The C.O.S. was the starting point and training ground for many of the women whose work is examined in this thesis. The London C.O.S. was central in the provision of practical experience and, to a great extent, theoretical instruction for prospective social workers from the mid 1880s.⁴⁰ For some, such as the residents of the Lady Margaret Hall Settlement, this took the form of a full-time course of work and study, planned in detail and sanctioned by the work committee of the settlement and the local C.O.S. District

⁴⁰ For the role of the C.O.S. School of Sociology in the provision of theoretical training in social policy see José Harris, 'The Webbs, The C.O.S. and the Ratan Tata Foundation: Social Policy from the Perspective of 1912' in Martin Bulmer et. al. eds. *The Goals of Social Policy* (London: Unwin, 1989). Prior to the foundation of the C.O.S. School of Sociology the Society sponsored a course of lectures at the Women's University Settlement, Southwark on various aspects of social policy and theory which were first advertised in the *Charity Organisation Review* February 1893 pp. 63-4.

Committee.⁴¹ Others worked on a much more informal basis; Beatrice Webb and Katherine Furse fitted the work around their family commitments, giving spare hours to visiting and interviewing applicants in Soho and Whitechapel.⁴² For the majority of these young women volunteers and would-be District Secretaries, the C.O.S. District Office was a point of first contact with the poor.

But the form that this first contact with the poor took in the training schemes of the C.O.S. was a very different one from the tradition of the local lady visiting her poorer neighbours. It was not a matter of the unsettling assault on the senses, the shock of entering the 'Cage and Den' of slum courts and dark cellars, that Alain Corbin discusses so effectively in his work and which is such a prevalent image in the memoirs of earlier lady philanthropists.⁴³ For, before sight, sound and smell, the first encounter that the newcomer to the C.O.S. had with applicants was on paper. The new volunteer was given a set of case papers to look over in the District Office and set to writing letters of enquiry concerning applicants. It was not the best way of engaging the interest of new volunteers, as writers in the *Charity Organisation Review* agreed, but it was a means of immediately

⁴¹ In 1897 for example, Miss Hooker, a resident of the LMH Settlement in Lambeth submitted her schedule to the settlement's work committee. She planned to spend six mornings a week working for the Vauxhall District C.O.S., four evenings running children's clubs, and five afternoons on Mother's Meetings, a children's library, Sunday School classes, visiting her club members and on behalf of the C.O.S. The committee approved of this list, but unsurprisingly insisted that Miss Hooker kept one day a week entirely free from such work. By October 1905, the work of all new residents at the settlement was under the direction of E.J. Urwick of the C.O.S. School of Sociology, but innovations in practical training still originated from the District Committees. In 1907 Miss Ewbank began 'a special and rather experimental course of special [sic] training at St. James' [District] C.O.S.' under the direction of the Secretary Theodora Morton. The scheme aimed at 'a more thorough training in 'friendly visiting' & in work in connection with other organisations as well as ordinary relief case work'. London Metropolitan Archives A/LMH/15 Lady Margaret Hall Settlement Work Committee Minute Book, vol. 1. The Women's University Settlement in Southwark also had a similar relationship with the local C.O.S. The C.O.S. Districts Sub-Committee resolved in May 1890 'that it is desirable that the St Saviour's [District C.O.S.] office should be used as a training ground for the ladies of the settlement who desire to assist the Society's work' and appointed a Secretary to fulfil this aim LMA A/FWA/C/A49/15.

⁴² Webb worked for the C.O.S. briefly in May 1883, Furse during the winter of 1897-8, see Mackenzie ed., 1982 pp. 85-6; Furse, 1940, p. 156

⁴³ Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odour and the French Social Imagination* (Leamington Spa: Berg, 1986) pp. 152-3

altering the perceptions of vaguely altruistic individuals. As Helen Bosanquet noted, 'the student must be taught what the good is that he wishes to do, before he can be taught how to do it', and this highly structured first encounter, filtered through the narrative device of the case history, focussed the new worker's attention upon the prominent signs and symptoms of the case and its overdetermined outcome.⁴⁴

Olive Garnett was surprised at her own enjoyment of such work after her first day working in the Highbury District C.O.S. Office in 1892. Provided with a set of case papers and told what to say, Garnett 'wrote letters about cases, which interested me very much, & got some insight into the work of the Society'. In her diary that evening Garnett went so far as to list seven of the cases she had worked through earlier in the day, narrated in the orthodox form found in Annual Reports, case papers and articles in the *Charity Organisation Review* throughout the period in question: 'Case 2. A wife aged 20 & lately deserted by her husband aged 21. Wife had a violent temper. C.O.S. decided not to help her, as it was thought she could easily get a [domestic] situation, a former mistress being willing to see anyone on her behalf'. Garnett's initial perceptions of the poor were contained and given form by the narrative structure of the case histories of deficient characters, with the failures of will and habit clearly marked in the Society's records. With these stories transcribed, and the experienced workers' diagnoses added as footnotes, Garnett readily adapted herself to the lady volunteer's role as the instrument of character reformation. Even after a day spent writing letters from the District Secretary's dictation, Garnett confessed 'I found the work very interesting; it gave me a feeling of

⁴⁴ Helen Bosanquet, 'Methods of Training' p. 106

power, so that I felt if I were only set in the way of managing affairs I should perform wonders, which was very conceited of me'.⁴⁵

It is difficult to judge the significance of this particular form of philanthropic work being structured initially by the written word, rather than the physical encounter, by the practice of reading rather than hearing, seeing, smelling and feeling one's way into the homes of the poor. It reflects the emphasis upon institutions and bureaucracy, upon the wholesale reform of the relief of the poor that was the aim of the Society. The case papers themselves immediately brought to life the complex inter-relations of local institutions that Bosanquet urged the new student to acquaint herself with, right there in the office. The Hammersmith and Fulham case papers contain numerous examples of a complete reversal of fortune for the applicant after the withdrawal of Friendly Society funds, a decision on a out-relief by the Poor Law Relieving Officer, or local rumours reported by District Visitors.

The St Clement's nurse called, said she had no definite grounds for saying that there is drink in this case – has never seen appt. worse for drink – but has smelt it - & consulted Nurse Heatly – who agreed with her - & said she had to open her window after appt.'s last visit to her – saw a jug of beer being taken in by appt's little boy yesterday.⁴⁶

Reading through bundles of such reports and papers, the new C.O.S. worker could not but be aware of the instrumental role of women social activists in numerous capacities over the district in controlling the fortunes of applicants. The character of the 'case' was given

⁴⁵ Johnson, 1989 p. 103 Olive Garnett, diary entry 10th August, 1892. Garnett was encouraged to do voluntary work at the Highbury C.O.S. District Committee by her 'cousin Dick', Richard Janion, who was the District Secretary. Despite her apparent enjoyment of the work, she wrote to Richard Janion in February, 1893 'declining [C.O.S. work] for the present'.

⁴⁶ Entry in case paper, January, 1897 LMA A/FWA/HF/B2/10. The applicant, Maria, had asked for financial support for cooking lessons after obtaining a legal separation from her husband Thomas, a nightporter, and gaining custody of her children. Aid was refused due to her indeterminate moral character. In 1910 the C.O.S. took up the case of her son William, whom she had turned out of the house. The committee consulted Thomas who confirmed their suspicion that his wife 'drinks and assaults and ill treats his children'. By 1930, however, when Maria applied for convalescent aid for her daughter, she appeared 'a respectable old lady' to the interviewer. The reading of character was never stable and fixed.

form through the refracted reports of Bible-women, nurses, rescue workers, hospital almoners and rent collectors.⁴⁷ Even though the local Poor Law Relieving Officers were invariably male, lady Guardians were frequently C.O.S. activists, and took a personal interest in cases that crossed their path.⁴⁸ In Hammersmith and Fulham, the first female Poor Law Guardians in the district, Florence Hunt and Jane Henniker were also members of the local C.O.S. Committee and Mrs Hunt's opinion of current cases carried an authority that was beyond question.⁴⁹ When it was rumoured that one longstanding case, Mr O'Hara, was in the habit of sending out for jugs of beer, he was saved by the local representative of the Society of St Vincent de Paul who cleared up any doubts by adding 'He is sure that Mrs Hunt would say the same thing if we asked her. She knew O'Hara well in the old days, and would certainly not have spared him if she thought he drank'.⁵⁰

The new worker's first impression of C.O.S. applicants came from the collision of the individual with the institution: the character of the case took shape from the interstices

⁴⁷ The reports were by and large solicited by the C.O.S. in order to inform their decision on cases. A typical letter of inquiry from 1897 reads 'Do you consider the family honest & respectable & do you think the man will recover & be able to resume work?' LMA A/FWA/HF/B2/6

⁴⁸ One strategy of the C.O.S. in attempting to organise charity in the metropolitan districts was the attempt to gain control of the local Poor Law Board of Guardians. It is difficult to judge what kind of support the C.O.S. gave to sympathetic women candidates, but certainly a number of the earliest and best known women Guardians were prominent members of Central and District Committees. For the work of women Guardians see Patricia Hollis, *Ladies Elect: Women in English Local Government, 1865-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987); for the relationship between the Poor Law and local C.O.S. Committees see Pat Ryan, 'Politics and Relief: East London Unions in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries' in Michael Rose ed. *The Poor and the City: The English Poor Law in its Urban Context, 1834-1914* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1985) pp. 134-173.

⁴⁹ Florence Marianne Hunt [Mrs Rowland Hunt] was an elected Poor Law Guardian for Hammersmith Centre from 1889-1895; Jane Livesey Henniker topped the ballot for Fulham North End from 1891 to 1899, rising to the position of chair of the Infirmary Committee. Minutes of Fulham and Hammersmith Board of Guardians, 1889-1899 LMA F/BG/ 27-36.

⁵⁰ Entry in case paper, 15th February, 1897 LMA A/FWA/HF/B2/6 The names of all applicants have been changed. Mr O'Hara 'R.C. but respectable' (!) was a chronic case for the Hammersmith and Fulham C.O.S. from 1895 to 1915, unable to work at his bricklaying trade most winters due to rheumatism. He was given cash and coal tickets by the C.O.S. for his family of 7 children as a supplement to his sick club payments and aid from the S.V.P., but eventually the Society recommended the Infirmary for him and the workhouse for his family. It is possible that his case was first referred to the C.O.S. by Mrs Hunt who served on the Workhouse and Visiting Committee and the Dispensary and Vaccinations Committee of the Board of Guardians from 1891-1894. His file is the only one to include a note of thanks from the applicant, written from a convalescent home in Dover.

of the reports of doctors, priests, Relieving Officers and employers. 'Volumes of biography abounding in interest' wrote H.V. Toynbee, 'might be written from the materials contained in the case-papers stowed away in the offices of the Society'.⁵¹ But the way in which these narratives gave form to the working-class poor was not in favour with all social activists in the local district. The relentless classification of the poor into cases was clearly a point of contention between C.O.S. workers and other women social activists in the district. One outspoken critic in two cases was 'Sister Lizzie', who worked from the South Street Mission, Hammersmith, which she ran as a women's refuge and inebriates' home. In one particular instance the District Committee rejected an application for convalescent care in the case of a woman with a tubercular knee. It was rejected on the grounds that the medical advisor had recommended a convalescence of at least a year in order for this woman to recover fully. As the C.O.S. would only assist in cases where they could maximise the chances of a full cure, and were not prepared to pay for a full year of treatment, the Committee recommended that the applicant entered the workhouse infirmary. Sister Lizzie wrote an objection on behalf of the applicant.

With regard to Mrs Wheatly I have nothing further to add. She certainly does not want to go into the 'Infirmery', neither do I think it is the best thing for her: as I told you before, she has already spent three months there, and they did not attempt to do anything definite for her and of course I know that the 'Infirmery' does not exist for the purpose of dealing with specific 'cases' such as hers. As you see the Doctor definitely says that she requires some special air and treatment, and it seems strange to me that your society which exists to help poor deserving 'cases' should decline to help one like this, if only with a trial. When she has become a hopeless cripple she will then have a right to the 'Infirmery' but to avoid that condition she has applied to you.⁵²

⁵¹ H.V. Toynbee, 'The Employment of Volunteers' p. 228

⁵² Letter to Maude Marshall, District Secretary Hammersmith and Fulham C.O.S., 11th December 1908 bound with case paper LMA A/FWA/HF/B2/24

The highlighting of the expression ‘cases’ in this letter foregrounds the contested representation of different forms of benevolent work. In conveying her knowledge of the applicant’s personal history and wishes, and of what could be provided by the Poor Law, Sister Lizzie represented her effectiveness as a philanthropic worker. But by refusing the classificatory language of the ‘case’, suspending it in speech marks, and condemning the decision not to aid a ‘deserving’ case, the writer distanced herself from the ‘hard and dry’ approach of the C.O.S. It is as if by this very mark of orthography, this woman drew a distinction between the scientific principles of C.O.S. social theory and the personal nature of Christian caritas. The ‘case’ could be cured, but Mrs Wheatly could be cared for.

Dealing with opposition to C.O.S. methods was, however, a task for the more experienced workers in the District Committee. Once the new worker had familiarised herself with the case paper system and the form in which applicants’ histories were to be written it was time for her to move on to meeting the poor in person. Armed with a rudimentary knowledge of the institutions that governed the life of the working-class poor in her district, she passed on to the two crucial sites for the reading of the character of the case: the interview and the home visit.

iii. Taking Down a Case and Paying the Home Visit: Reading and Writing the Characters of the Poor in West London

H.V. Toynebee admitted that confronting new volunteers with a bundle of case papers and dictating a set of letters to them did not meet the expectations of those who offered their assistance to the District Committees. ‘They find bookwork very dull’ he observed, ‘and desire to be brought into contact with actual cases of poverty’. Toynebee and other C.O.S.

workers aimed to retain women social activists' interest by sating this desire that went beyond curiosity: a desire to see the bodies of the poor and hear their stories. 'Usually attracted [to C.O.S. work] by cases' lady volunteers were to be best utilised by conducting the initial interview with applicants. They were to put these disjointed personal life histories into a written form that would serve as a character testimony for the Committee.

The list of questions that the interviewer had to ask the applicant was extensive and exhaustive. Each was laid out on the pro forma that fronted the case paper and some inquiries, such as the request for proof of marital status, provoked an outraged response from applicants. All in all, A.L. Hodson found questioning cases in this way the 'most difficult piece of work' that faced her as part of her training at the Vauxhall District C.O.S. office.

To sit opposite a proud, sensitive man and be obliged to ask him all sorts of questions about his family, his work, his income and debt, makes me feel hot and cold all over. The temptation to skip the difficult questions is almost irresistible, and yet one feels that unless the circumstances are recorded fully and accurately, not only will the work be incomplete and unsatisfactory, but also at the next Committee meeting, when the subject has to be fully discussed, and the case dealt with, the incompleteness of the information provided will be obvious to every member present.⁵³

The questions had to be asked nevertheless to transform the 'proud man' and his family circumstances into a case that could be put before the committee and judged correctly.

The volunteer, a young woman like Hodson herself in most cases, was given the authority to demand answers to these questions by the empiricist approach of the C.O.S. itself.

W.G. Martley acknowledged that just getting the answers to the required questions took

⁵³ A.L. Hodson, *Letters from a Settlement* (London: Edward Arnold, 1909) pp. 30-31. Hodson was a resident of the Lady Margaret Hall Settlement in Lambeth from 1897 to 1899, which offered a guided scheme of practical social work training to its female residents. It is clear from the records of the Settlement that nearly all residents had some degree of involvement with the local C.O.S. District Committees, see above and LMH Settlement Work Committee Minute Book, London Metropolitan Archives A/LMH/15. Hodson's book was intended as a guide for young women considering moving to a philanthropic settlement.

‘much tact... to get at the indispensable facts without wearying people needlessly’ and even this first stage took ‘perhaps half an hour’.

But facts were not all and empiricism did not provide everything that the District Committee required. The lady volunteer had to go beyond this in the course of the interview and it was in this second phase that the ‘natural’ skills of her gender and class were seen of crucial importance.

But even the fullest and most circumstantial statement is more or less unsatisfactory unless it is so worded as to present a vivid picture of the applicant and his condition. The mere facts by themselves are insufficient, the dry bones must be made to live. This end can best be attained, firstly by writing down the story in the very words of the teller; and secondly, by adding a brief descriptive note of his appearance and manner.⁵⁴

The lady volunteer had to make the applicants into characters – both in the literary and moral understandings of the term – as well as into cases. She had to write the applicant into a living picture for the committee, giving him a depth and subjectivity that was presumed to lie beyond the skill of the working-class agent. She had to attempt verisimilitude, writing down verbatim a story that had never been transcribed before, and as Martley put it, ‘holding a brief for the applicant’ in her attempt to understand and to make his history real to its readers. But even in this moment of being the applicant’s imagined advocate, the case worker had to draw upon the morally evaluative meaning of character.

Those ‘brief descriptive’ notes on appearance and manner suggested by Martley held the key to the classification of the case: they were the clues of character; marks of ill disciplined habits or a well formed will; the bodily signs that could not be obfuscated by well chosen words. ‘The applicant seemed respectable looking’; ‘applicant untidy and

⁵⁴ W.G. Martley, ‘How to Take Down a Case’ C.O.S. Occasional Paper 50, March 1895

smelt of drink'; 'applicant a better sort of woman who has a sort of crushed resignation about her that is very pathetic'. Through her reports the interviewer made the cases morally legible to the committee, diagnosing the 'true' cause of the problem that might run quite at odds with the immediate needs voiced by the applicant. She had both to read for morally evaluative character and write vivid 'literary' characters. There was however, always a slight hesitation about these judgements formed in the office, so often qualified by the words, 'appeared', 'seemed' or 'looked'. For some could deceive even the eye of the trained lady volunteer.

In one case in the Hammersmith and Fulham District the symptoms of moral laxity were missed at the first interview, and it took further investigation to reveal what was to the Committee their most pressing duty. The Almoner of St George's Hospital referred Mary Small to the C.O.S. for convalescent aid in 1914. The woman worker who took down her case described her as 'nicely dressed and of superior appearance' – comments that usually boded well for the applicant. Mary Small had worked as a servant both in private domestic service and in various hotels (the latter was the first indication of her 'real' problem and was remarked upon by the interviewer). The experience of domestic service may have acted in Mary's favour at this first interview, for the encounter between the middle-class lady offering the security of employment or assistance and herself would have been more familiar to her than many applicants. And likewise, Mary was having her character taken and read by this lady, as she would in the search for employment as a domestic servant. Given this, it is interesting that the second volunteer who visited Mary and her mother at home, a situation the applicant would have been quite unused to, recorded a quite different impression.

Mary could embody refinement and respectability in the office, but her home surroundings told another, deeper truth to the Committee. A neighbour commented to the case-worker that Mary's older sister 'was well known and always about with different men', and her previous employer stated that despite being an excellent worker, she had lost her place at his hotel as she,

Was considered very 'rapid'...and when she was seen at a Restaurant with one of the Hotel Residents (a man) it was thought well that she might leave. There was a general impression that she was not quite straight speaking morally, which arose largely from the fact that she dressed extremely well and could not have paid the cost out of her wages.⁵⁵

The eventual decision was to try and get Mary into a rescue home for women in moral danger. The Committee called upon the local Rescue worker, who visited Mary and her mother at home and was 'not favourably impressed by her'. Mary refused to leave her mother and was in court two years later convicted of stealing plate from her employer.

The interview in the office and the process of 'taking down a case' gave the immediate indications of character, but the narrative of the domestic interior constructed the truth of the case. It was only when the applicant's home had been visited and reported on that any decision could be reached. For the theory of the reciprocal relationship between environment and character which played such an important part in the work of rent collectors also held sway over the philanthropic theory of the C.O.S. The applicant's home was therefore the site where character (or its absence) was mapped out for the visitor to see. But as cases were selected on the grounds of 'deservingness' before any regenerative work was contemplated, the case worker had to deduce the inhabitant's condition rapidly and definitively from what she saw around her. Every object had its

⁵⁵ Decision of Committee recorded in case paper A/FWA/HF/B2/2

meaning, and some suggested a character so far fragmented that the C.O.S. had no role to play. The investigative gaze of the case worker pieced together a narrative of moral character, deservingness and 'helpability' from the scattered objects of the life of the poor: pawn tickets, clothes, crockery, jugs of beer, bread and 'scrape', closed windows and crippled children.

I visited the home...& saw the man & his wife. The room in which they all live is a large one, about 18 by 16 feet & a very good height & with two large windows, one of which was open. The room was not unpleasant, though I cannot say that it was either clean or tidy, but Mrs O'Hara said that she had been at work yesterday & had not been able to do anything to it. Some drawers half open revealed a state of things of longer standing than one day.⁵⁶

The middle-class female case worker could work within the easy assumptions of knowing the domestic space and how it should be managed. She could provide a broad impression of the working class domestic space in her report, in which her overall impression was sufficient in itself, without the need for an itemised report of each of the objects around which she based her narrative. Her perception of degrees of domestic order and respectability, of surface and depth created the character of the applicant on file.

Called to make H[ome] V[isit]. Mrs Blackby showed me both her rooms. Her bed sitting room was very clean & tidy & nicely furnished. The sheets on the bed were quite clean & the beds were properly made. The kitchen was not so tidy...She impressed me favourably.⁵⁷

The reports of home visits paid by women case workers in Hammersmith and Fulham almost invariably possess this confidence: a knowledge of what was 'proper' and what was not; a sense of right to pull back bed-covers and inspect the sheets; a duty to open

⁵⁶ Report of home visit paid by Miss M Wright, Hon. Sec. Hammersmith and Fulham District C.O.S. January, 1903 LMA A/FWA/HF/B2/6

⁵⁷ Report of home visit (unsigned) Hammersmith and Fulham C.O.S. September 1911 LMA A/FWA/HF/B2/12

drawers. For character flaws could lurk in all these hiding places and the secret corners of the home had to be broken open under the gaze of the lady visitor.⁵⁸

This way of seeing the working-class domestic interior is something quite different from that particular poetics of space, the representational tradition of re-creating the homes of the poor for a bourgeois readership. Carolyn Steedman has recently explored the desires embodied in these writings and re-writings of the small homes of the poor from the mid-nineteenth century onwards: the warm, crowded interiors with shelves of treasured crockery; the damp cellar with an empty grate, one chipped teacup and pile of rags; the domestic set pieces so central in the work of Elizabeth Gaskell, Henry Mayhew and countless other novelists and investigators.⁵⁹ But unlike such representations which somehow always ask the reader to make that transference of desire or disgust – the projection of the (bourgeois reading) self into these tiny spaces of comfort or desolation, the imagination of what it would be like to live like that – the homes reported on by lady visitors for the C.O.S. are always already occupied. The applicants are always there to show round the case worker, and the home is them and they are the home. There is simply no space in these peopled interiors for that moment of identification and for the viewer or reader to take possession of these (generally squalid) spaces even in the imagination. For the identity that was assumed to hold between homes and characters made such a match precisely unimaginable. The efficient lady visitor simply could never have such a home, possessing as she did, a resilient character.

⁵⁸ This process was not without its contemporary critics. In Ella Hepworth Dixon, *The Story of a Modern Woman* (London: Heinemann, 1894) the philanthropic work of the aristocratic Alison Ives is central to the action of the novel, but is positioned in opposition to the practices inculcated by the C.O.S. “I couldn’t bear anyone to say that I had ‘taken up slumming’. You know how I detest the whole attitude of the upper and middle classes to the poor. Lifting the lids of people’s saucepans and routing under their beds for fluff is simply impertinence. Why, district visiting is nothing less than a gross breach of manners” p. 48. Rather than slumming, Dixon’s protagonist removes the objects of her interest to her Mayfair flat where she ensures that they are trained in domestic service.

⁵⁹ Carolyn Steedman, ‘What a Rag Rug Means’ *Journal of Material Culture* 3 (1998) 259-281

However, there is an exception to this way of seeing and writing the working-class domestic interior in the Hammersmith and Fulham case papers, and it is an exception that probably makes this point more clearly than I have done myself.

Agent called at the home, saw appt. wife & children... The downstairs room is very poorly furnished & looked dirty & untidy; the woman said she had been out at work. It only contains a wooden table in the centre of the room, another under the window on which were standing a few plants in pots; four or five wooden chairs (one broken); a small looking glass on wall over mantel piece; a square wooden dwarf cupboard, & a very small quantity of crockery on the two shelves fixed at the sides of the chimney breast. There were some pieces of floor cloth on the floor. On the table were the remains of a meal – apparently of bread & dripping.⁶⁰

In this report, completed most unusually by the District's agent, the description of the domestic interior conforms precisely to that representational tradition that Steedman has disclosed. We follow the eye of the beholder through the doorway where the inhabitants are clustered and on into an empty room. The gaze then wanders over the room, with every object noted and given its place in the compilation of a domestic documentary. This vacant still life, with its signs of sudden interruption, asks the reader to walk in and take possession, to finish up the bread and dripping like some less fortunate Goldilocks. Everything is seen as if for the first time, and each object is recorded with shocking clarity.

Nothing could be further from the perfunctory (but perfectly functional) reports generally submitted by lady visitors: 'Miss Stafford paid the Home Visit - very nice tidy house, visitor was favourably impressed'. For the agent's report gave the interior to the District Committee to read as they would, leaving out his judgements and himself in favour of this democratic documentation: there was no definitive reading of character in

⁶⁰ Report of home visit by agent Hammersmith and Fulham C.O.S. October 1907 LMA A/FWA/HF/B2/20. Despite this report, the applicant was given a loan to set up a grocer's barrow.

this static picture. In the women case workers' reports however, the writer was always in the description, moving through the rooms, opening, uncovering, looking under and revealing the hidden sides of the characters who stood with her in the home. What was at stake was not the evocation of a way of life, but the elucidation of these characters: the latter task could never be performed effectively by the working-class male agent.

There is only one instance in the surviving C.O.S. case-papers of an occasion on which the trained visitor herself felt such a manner of inspection to be inappropriate. The visitor in this case, as in an extraordinary number of others in the district, was Florence Hunt, soon to be the first female Poor Law Guardian for Hammersmith and Fulham. Mrs Hunt was 'a very able woman, of great vigour of mind and organising power' with 'a greatness in all her thought and actions' – and, as her daughter irreverently noted, in her size.⁶¹ In the late 1880s Mrs Hunt travelled round the 'somewhat slummy district at the back of Olympia', visiting cases on behalf of the C.O.S. and then to the District Office on Hammersmith Broadway, carried in a donkey cart driven 'by an evil minded little boy, highly recommended by the C.O.S.'. ⁶² As all her contributions to C.O.S. Council meetings make clear, she was an authoritative and confident worker, not easily swayed off her course of action.

The case of the Hopkins family was however different in many ways from those of the other applicants visited by Mrs Hunt. Mr Hopkins was the son of a country doctor and himself an insurance agent out of work through illness. He provided four letters of

⁶¹ Agnes Hunt, *This is My Life* (London: Blackie, 1938) Preface by E.C. Kenyon p. xii; Hunt's memoirs represent her mother as a tremendously powerful figure – Florence Hunt's difficulties in getting about her work due to her 'not inconsiderable sixteen stone' (p.12), is just one of the ways in which Agnes Hunt humanises this intimidating role model. I am very grateful to Roger Cooter for bringing Hunt's memoirs to my attention.

⁶² Three years after being widowed in 1879, Mrs Hunt sold up the family home in Shropshire and moved herself and the youngest handful of her 11 children to Australia 'after hearing a lecture at the village hall' about the opportunities offered in the Antipodes. Her plan to buy an island and raise angora goats unrealised, she return to settle at 23 Girdlers Road, West Kensington in late 1886.

commendation from previous employers in the City, and from the outset of his application the Committee promised him £2 if inquiries proved satisfactory. His class identity was far removed from the porters, carmen, domestic servants and laundresses who made up the bulk of applications to the Hammersmith and Fulham office. Mrs Hunt did not find this particular home visit an easy one.

I visited Mrs Hopkins but could not talk to her as her husband was there & talked all the time...His attitude was such that I could not make any enquiries as to bedding etc. as he made me feel they would be an impertinence. His wife has a charming face & a gentle subdued manner. She was altering the dress we sent her & had a kind of remains of an old body on with a woollen shawl over it. The children were tidy but dreadfully delicate as if they got no fresh air. They are unusually pretty refined looking children.⁶³

In every part of this report the markers of a higher class are perceived and transcribed. The man's attitude, the wife's charming face, the children's delicate and refined bodies were such as to alter radically the woman visitor's confidence and authority. Mrs Hunt was presented with bodies and attitudes which suggested that at some point normal (middle-class) domestic patterns had existed, and she therefore began to perceive her home visit less as beneficent moral surveillance and more as unwelcome spying. The markers of middle-class identity denoted a shared code between the visitor and the visited, one in which the home was supposedly a private sphere, not to be broken open under the investigation of a stranger. Mrs Hunt lacked the confident authority to demand to see the rent book and pawn tickets, to open drawers and examine the cleanliness of bedsheets, because of the absolutely taken for granted understanding of class and gender distinctions shared by the visitor and visited. In this domestic space in which the visitor perceived the shadows of a former bourgeois existence, the authority reverted to Mr

⁶³ Report of Home Visit by Mrs F. M. Hunt May 1887 LMA A/FWA/HF/B2/1

Hopkins in his attempt to play the part of the pater familias. He knew the role he was supposed to act, and therefore the direction of the case-worker was not only unnecessary, but if continued would present a challenge to that masculine middle-class identity itself, in which sole authority over one's family was paramount.

Throughout the year over which this case extended, Mr Hopkins repeatedly asserted his identity as a gentleman to the C.O.S. District Committee. That in itself turned Mrs Hunt's attempts to read his character from his surroundings rather than his word, into an impertinence. Used to telling his story, formulating his own character in the bourgeois codes of manly independence, the case worker's efforts to form him from the scattered shreds of his environment and to make out his character from the bodily signs of his family simply could not work for either party. Only with the discovery of Mr Hopkins' habits of wife beating and drinking did the case worker gain the confidence to intervene further in the family's life. Finding Mrs Hopkins alone one day 'in a very sad state' marked by the ill treatment of her husband 'in every possible way', Mrs Hunt could once more allow the signs of the body to take over from word of the gentleman in the judgement of character.

iv. Conclusion

There is, I think, still more to be said about the effect of these encounters on the identities of women social case workers. Beyond the professional, expert identity that many workers drew from their systematic work with case after case in the District Offices, whether they were part time volunteers or full time paid workers, there was something else at stake in this practice of making characters. After a day working for the C.O.S. in Soho, Beatrice Webb concluded in her diary 'it is distinctly *advantageous to us* to go

amongst the poor. We can get from them an experience of life that is novel and interesting'.⁶⁴ This does not sound the most profound of Webb's insights, but there is something about the way in which so many who were involved in such work felt the need to take these stories, these cases of deficient characters, home with them. Webb and Olive Garnett both transcribed many of the cases they came across in their work with the C.O.S. into their diaries, usually without much comment, but still they needed to write these very other stories into part of their personal testaments. These young women of good families felt the desire 'to be brought into contact with actual cases of poverty' and to make them part of their own story, if only as an affirmation of what they were not. Case history after case history offered narratives of dependency, of incomplete character and irresolute will: the inability to be what these ladies were in the process of becoming through their work; self-sustaining, independent subjects who now exercised the power to take and make public characters.

⁶⁴ Mackenzie ed. 1982 p. 85 Webb diary entry 18th May 1883

[7]

The Politics of Work: Feminism, Professionalisation and Women Inspectors of Factories and Workshops

In this final case study the relationship between class differentiation, social action and the formation of feminist identity is made explicit. As the previous chapters have explored the role of social action in the formation of what I have termed an *Ur*-type of feminist identity, so this last substantive chapter, by the nature of its historical location and subject matter, engages with late nineteenth and early twentieth-century feminism and feminists proper. The chapter takes as its subject the first women factory inspectors, appointed in 1893. Using the accounts left of and by the inspectors May Abraham, Adelaide Anderson, Lucy Deane, Rose Squire and Hilda Martindale I explore the representations they provided of their working practices, professional identities and political strategies during the tenuous first two decades of their department's existence.¹ The connection between this area of middle-class women's work and the formation of feminist identity in the late nineteenth century is apparent on two levels.

First, the appointment of women factory inspectors had been the object of what we would now understand to be a feminist campaign since the late 1870s. The Society for the Promotion of the Employment of Women (SPEW) and the Women's Protective and Provident League (WPPL), organisations that derived their political analyses and members from the mid-century Langham Place network, both lobbied sporadically for the

¹ See Biographical Index and below. Mary Paterson was, with May Abraham, one of the first two women inspectors, but as she was based in Glasgow for most of the period in question here she features little in the writings of the metropolitan inspectors. By 1908 there were 16 women in the factory department, but lacking documentation and needing focus I have limited my study to the five named here.

appointment of female inspectors to enforce protective legislation regarding women workers.² As I shall argue shortly, the issue of women inspectors and by relation, the wider subject of protective labour legislation, turned out to be a bitterly divisive one within these organisations, fracturing the intimate association between feminism and laissez-faire liberalism. This conflict had a profound effect on the political identity of modern feminism and the women factory inspectors were participants in this process of re-formation.

Problematic though the campaign for women inspectors proved to be for established feminist suffrage organisations, the subject fostered a demand for political representation among the far broader group of middle-class women social activists. As with the campaign for women Poor Law Guardians and School Board members during the 1870s and 1880s, the appointment of women factory inspectors was viewed by many such women as the rational and necessary official acknowledgement of their expertise in the social sphere.³ Election – or in the case of the inspectors, appointment – would merely add statutory powers to their natural authority in the administration of and intervention into the lives of poor women and children.

In her report on the national conference of women engaged in social work at Bristol in 1892, Miss Marshall noted that ‘the only political element introduced was the

² The key figures in the Langham Place Group were Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, Bessie Rayner Parkes, Jessie Boucheret, Adelaide Proctor and Emily Faithfull. This network of women activists gave support to an older generation of activists and writers, including Anna Jameson, and fostered the campaigns of younger activists such as Elizabeth Garret and Emily Davies. Proctor and Boucheret established the Society for the Promotion of the Employment of Women in 1859 and Faithfull, the Victoria Press which published the *English Woman's Journal* (later *English Woman's Review of Social and Industrial Questions*). Ada Heather Bigg was one of several women who combined campaigning for SPEW and the WPPL during the 1880s. For the role of the Langham Place Group in nineteenth century feminism and its relationship with liberal political theory see Barbara Caine, *English Feminism, 1780-1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) pp. 93-115.

³ See Patricia Hollis, *Ladies Elect: Women in English Local Government, 1865-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987) for a detailed examination of the campaign for and election of women Guardians and School Board members.

desire for women's suffrage, and that was desired only in order to bring pressure to bear about the appointment of women factory inspectors and the like'.⁴ The imperviousness of successive Home Secretaries to the demand for such appointments persuaded women social activists that they needed national suffrage rights to effect such changes in the national civil service. This marked a clear difference between the campaign for women factory inspectors and earlier efforts towards the election of women in local government. Even anti-suffragists such as Mrs Humphry Ward advocated the participation of women in local government, but many women social activists expressed anxiety about a woman's place in national politics. The work of the women factory inspectors was central in allaying this anxiety during the 1890s.

The second point of connection between the work of the women inspectors and the formation of modern feminism occurred on a more intimate, individuated level of identity formation. I want to argue that through the process of their work, the women factory inspectors both came to express their identity as women in opposition to their male colleagues and began to criticise the political analyses of liberal feminism. This far, I am only treading a path well mapped out by other feminist historians, who have echoed with varying degrees of critical sophistication Isabella Ford's arguments of 1907, namely that through their 'work as Guardians, Factory Inspectors, Sanitary Inspectors and so forth' middle-class women gained new insight into 'the industrial life and working conditions' of working-class women.⁵ It was this experience, this new clarity of vision, it is claimed, that sustained the turn toward socialism, the rejection of liberal feminist theory and a new articulation of 'women' as a sex class at the turn of the century.

⁴ Miss L. Marshall, 'Report of the Conference of Women at Bristol' *Charity Organisation Review* (1892) 413-442 (p. 442)

⁵ Isabella Ford, 'Women and Socialism' (1907) facsimile repr. in *The Reformers: Socialist Feminism* ed. Marie Mulvey Roberts (London: Routledge, 1993) p. 17

There is no doubt that during the mid-1890s there was a conflict that reshaped the identity of the feminist movement on the eve of an upsurge in suffragist activity. It was a conflict that centred on the meaning of work and the significance of class difference as a division between 'women' – and the women inspectors, as we shall see, were at the heart of it. As I argued in Chapter Two, the political legacy of this particular moment of feminist history still shapes the British feminist movement today. Using the story of the winning side in this particular struggle, feminism still takes as part of its political identity the history of the vanquishing of misguided liberal feminists by socialists whose function was to allow working-class women to speak for themselves. The debates surrounding protective labour legislation in the 1890s are seen to reflect the growing understanding on the part of middle-class women activists of the 'day to day realities of women's workplace problems' and the consequent re-formulation of the idea of feminist 'sisterhood'. This ideological shift, it is argued, brought about a re-imagining of the political category 'women', a new feminist identity that was inclusive of and sympathetic to class difference. As such, this moment of history is still central to how feminism represents itself on the subject of class in the late twentieth century.⁶

But the particular narratives of the women factory inspectors that form the subject of this chapter provide a much more complex and politically uncomfortable story of the identifications of gender and class at work during this fundamental moment of feminist reformation. Although the broad currents of liberal imperialism and socialism re-shaped the political category of 'women' in the course of this debate, dis-identification from working-class women continued to play a vital part in the self-construction of the women

⁶ Rosemary Feuer, 'The Meaning of 'Sisterhood': The British Women's Movement and Protective Labor [sic] Legislation, 1870-1914' *Victorian Studies* 31 (1988) 233-260 (p. 250); Caine, 1997 pp. 147-158; Philippa Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England: Private Roles and Public Commitment* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) pp. 157-175

factory inspectors and, I would argue, the wider group of middle-class women in the labour movement. In this final case study I want to explore the re-shaping of the gender identities of the women factory inspectors that took place through their constant deployment of the practices of reading, writing and theorising social class in the course of their work. Once again, the cross-class encounters inherent in the inspectors' work issued a challenge to the dominant discourse of middle-class femininity, and once again, the women inspectors drew upon the codes of class around them to form a new professional identity.

As I have suggested, it was a re-formation that was connected more intimately with an explicitly feminist political identity than that in either of the two previous case-studies. In part this is due to the slightly later period in which these women and their work came to the fore – a period in which women workers generally renewed their efforts to be heard on the stage of national political life. But of course, more importantly, the women factory inspectors themselves were civil servants, appointed as the result of extensive lobbying of political parties and government ministers. They were a symbol of the place 'women' could achieve in the state apparatus in the name and the cause of other 'women', and as such were drawn in as important totems in debates on the place of women in national political life. Highly aware of their significance in this respect, the factory inspectors negotiated their personal and professional identities with the consciousness that they represented for many the future of feminism itself.

During the last ten years the prominence of the women factory inspectors in the social debates of the 1890s has led several women historians to examine their work. The sheer richness and diversity of sources available for such studies has also helped to make the subject an inviting one for the historian. For in addition to the official records, the

factory inspectors themselves documented their lives and work extensively. Between them they left three sets of memoirs and a diary, the published texts evoking the women's perceptions of themselves forty-odd years on as 'pioneers' and female adventurers in an unknown terrain, with all the accompanying heroics that that implies.⁷ The most detailed study produced in recent years, Mary Drake McFeely's *Lady Inspectors*, echoes the enthusiasm palpable in the inspectors' memoirs, and in its – slightly gushing – identification with the subjects of the study, leaves hanging many of the more troubling questions it raises.⁸

Like McFeely, I rely heavily upon the diary of Lucy Deane for an exploration of the appointment and early years of the women factory inspectors. But although many of the extracts cited from Deane's diary here also appear in McFeely's work, the similarities between our work begin and end there. For McFeely tends to excuse the constant exercise codes of class and gender in Deane's (and the other inspectors') writings as mere foibles – sometimes raising the cultural context in which such practices took shape, only to move on swiftly to the next adventure, with the appearance, almost, of embarrassment. Helen Jones' article on the other hand – perhaps because the object of her enquiry is neither a recuperative 'women's history' nor a history of feminism – is particularly effective in confronting the class based tensions inherent in the inspectors work which McFeely glosses over.⁹ Jones argues that the 'appointment of women factory inspectors was less a genuine change in class or gender power-relations and more a means of consolidating

⁷ Rose E. Squire, *Thirty Years in the Public Service: An Industrial Retrospect* (London: Nisbet, 1927); Adelaide Anderson, *Women in the Factory: An Administrative Adventure, 1893-1921* (London: John Murray, 1922); Hilda Martindale, *From One Generation to Another: A Book of Memories* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1944); see also Hilda Martindale, *Women Servants of the State, 1870-1938: A History of Women in the Civil Service* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1938); Gertrude Tuckwell, *Constance Smith: A Short Memoir* (London: Duckworth, 1931)

⁸ Mary Drake McFeely, *Lady Inspectors: The Campaign for a Better Workplace, 1893-1923* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988)

⁹ Helen Jones, 'Women Health Workers: The Case of the First Women Factory Inspectors in Britain' *Social History of Medicine* 1 (1988) 165-181

existing class and patriarchal relations', an analysis that has (unsurprisingly, given the investment of feminism in this particular moment of history) upset some feminist historians.¹⁰

Philippa Levine has struggled to counter Jones' argument by asserting that the expression of a separate identity from their male colleagues 'evidences [the women inspectors'] sense of female identification, of commonality with the women whose working conditions it was their job to investigate'.¹¹ This equation of differentiation from men with identification between women of all classes is a dangerous one. It takes us back to the problematic status of 'women' within feminism and social action discussed in Chapter Two and feminist historians' reluctance to address the place of class differentiation in the formation of first-wave feminism. Placing the women inspectors within the context of late nineteenth-century feminism, I want to argue that they did indeed come to express a common identity in opposition to their male colleagues – an identity they invested in and developed through their contact with feminist political networks. But it was an identity (and differentiation) expressed as much in the terms of class as it was gender, and it had a minimal effect on how they read and responded to the bodies of working-class women under their gaze.

i. Feminism and the Meaning of Work

In the mid-1890s the factory inspector, Lucy Deane was drawn into a debate that was a key turning point in first-wave feminism; one which, as I have argued, is still vital in British feminist political identity. As we have seen, Deane distanced herself from the contemporary concern with the 'New Woman', but she had no reservations about

¹⁰ Jones, 1988 p. 171

¹¹ Levine, 1990 p. 165

involving herself in this particular ideological conflict as far as her official position permitted her.¹² Along with her colleagues she attended a number of conferences and meetings of feminist organisations in the capital and beyond, becoming more convinced on each occasion of the necessity of their interventions. For the subject that so divided the women's movement of the time was one that was intimately intertwined with her professional capacity and personal identity: it was the subject of women's work and the question of the subjection of women factory workers to increasing state regulation.

Visit with Miss Anderson to Mrs Moberly Bell, who holds meetings of the Women's Work Soc^y (branch of Miss Heather-Biggs' Soc. opposing all legislation for women). We discussed for about 2 hours - none of those present had any practical experience or definite knowledge of Factory legislation and they returned to these prejudices after each argument against them as if to a fort from which they could not be evicted. Mrs Bell thought that the great advance made in the condition of Children & Women's work in Factories etc. since the 'dark times' prior to legislation was all due to our 'more enlightened age & greater sympathy' & not at all to legislation - in fact the 'same good result would have been achieved without restrictive legislation'. Letters sent out from various sources in reply to papers of questions sent out by this Soc...were all in favour of the Factory Legislation.¹³

As women inspectors of factories and workshops, civil servants employed to enforce legislation concerning women workers and to conduct special enquiries with regard to potential areas for further state regulation, Lucy Deane and her colleague Adelaide Anderson were a powerful and troubling presence at such meetings. They were the embodiment of the state's increasing concern with the condition of women factory

¹² See above, p. 101

¹³ Lucy Deane Business Diary 30th March 1896 MRC MSS 69/1/15. Ada Heather-Bigg was a prominent activist in SPEW and the Vigilance Association (the Personal Rights Association after 1886) throughout the 1880s and 1890s. Lucy Deane first met her in November 1893 at the women workers conference in Leeds: 'Travelled up with...Miss Heather-Bigg - excitable & impractical Women's Industrial Union & Sanitary Assoc. - said she took great interest in me & would back me up in my endeavours, - Individualist, i.e. the Wom. Indus. Union is against limiting labour of women by factory regulations...& against bringing laundries under [factory regulations]'. Lucy Deane Business Diary 7th November 1893 MRC MSS 69/1/1

workers in the late nineteenth-century, pioneer experts in the field of female industrial relations, appointed in the aftermath of the Royal Commission on Labour, 1891-94.

Liberal feminist organisations such as SPEW or the Women's Employment Defence League chaired by Ada Heather-Bigg, were in a dilemma when it came to the women inspectors. On the one hand Deane and her colleagues represented a remarkable breakthrough in employment opportunities for educated, upper middle-class women. They travelled the country, authorised by the Home Office to inspect factories and workrooms and to prosecute those in breach of the law in open court. They were the first group of women to gain access to the more senior ranks of the civil service and their contributions to the Annual Reports of the Factory Department made public their resilience and tenacity in pursuit of legal compliance. The factory inspectors were in this sense a triumph for the liberal feminist campaigns emergent from the Langham Place Group forty years earlier: the cry for satisfying and financially rewarding work for single ladies, which was still the major platform of SPEW in the 1890s.

Whilst Deane and her colleagues were to be celebrated on the one hand as representatives of a new sphere of professional employment for educated women, on the other, the basis of their work was an anathema to the tenets of liberal theory espoused by such groups. This new profession for ladies was predicated on the assumption that women workers in factories and workshops, like children and young people, should be subject to special regulations of the terms and conditions of their work, denying such working-class women the liberal credo of individual freedom of contract. The inspectors were employed to enforce what some liberal feminists referred to as 'class legislation', discriminating against the particular category of 'women' in the sphere of work whilst at the same time affirming their own place as women workers in the Civil Service. The women factory

inspectors therefore placed themselves at the centre of a conflict between different understandings of the category 'women' and their 'work', in which the longstanding tension between class and gender within the feminist movement came to the fore.

Though circumspect about speaking out in public and impairing the all important image of civil service impartiality, the women inspectors were far from passive onlookers when it came to this debate on factory legislation in the 1890s.¹⁴ Deane, Anderson and their superintending inspector May Abraham were in continuous contact with activists in the pro-legislative Women's Trades Union League, in particular Lady Emilia Dilke and Gertrude Tuckwell.¹⁵ The women inspectors supplied unpublished statistics, examples of gross breaches of factory legislation and cases of industrial disease to illustrate the speeches of WTUL supporters, not least those of Sir Charles Dilke to the Commons, in order to strengthen public opinion in favour of increased state regulation of women's work.¹⁶

There was a (rather premature) urgency in Deane and Anderson's involvement in the particular form this debate took in the feminist community in the aftermath of the 1895 Factory Act – a scramble to re-define what feminism was with a sense that women's

¹⁴ At a meeting of the Women's Emancipation Union in 1896 Deane was frustrated at not being able to allay the fear 'that the F. Acts will turn women out of work' as 'Being officials we couldn't stand up & say that this is not the case - that legislation by improving calibre of women makes them too valuable to be turned out'. Lucy Deane Business Diary 14th October 1896 MRC MS 69/1/16

¹⁵ Emilia Dilke took over the leadership of the then Women's Protective and Provident League on the death of Emma Paterson, its founder, in 1887. Over the next five years the League, which promoted the organisation of working-women, changed its name to the Women's Trades Union League and its policy from anti-interventionist to pro-legislative. For an analysis of the WTUL and its role in the changing feminist attitude to protective legislation see Feuer, 1988.

¹⁶ Emilia Dilke was careful to make contact with Lucy Deane and introduce her to prominent activists in the women's labour movement before she had even received her official appointment to the women's factory inspectorate in January, 1893, see above pp. 27-29. Abraham had acted as Dilke's secretary before her nomination to the factory inspectorate and continued to share a flat with Tuckwell. The relationship between the WTUL and the women's inspectorate was close and reciprocal, the former passing on complaints received from unions and women workers, the latter supplying information in return. Feuer argues by the late 1890s the WTUL had gained 'semi-official status as a collectors of violations of the factory acts, in effect becoming an adjunct of the state' p. 256. By 1895 Lucy Deane was sufficiently convinced of the virtues of the WTUL to donate £20 to it: MRC MSS 69/1/13 13th November 1895.

suffrage was imminent. Deane bolstered up Gertrude Tuckwell's resolve in 1896 by reminding her 'how necessary it is to 'educate' the female party which is in 'view' of suffrage now and will be captured by the 'Heather-Biggs' & rampant 'sex equality' people if we don't'.¹⁷ The very ideological basis of feminism had to be altered before this final victory for women, and altered in such a way that particular restrictions on women's work were welcomed and supported as in the best interests of the women themselves. But the women inspectors, the WTUL, the Women's Trades Union Association and the Women's Industrial Council all continued to meet with robust opposition from a range of older feminist organisations that clung to strict liberal formulations of the role of the state and the rights of the individual to self-regulation throughout the 1890s.

This conflict within feminism brought to light the inherent tension within the nineteenth century women's movement and increased the strain that arose from speaking of 'women' as a unified political category whilst always also articulating the necessary difference between the lady and the factory girl. The strand of liberal feminism emergent from the Langham Place Group forty years earlier had set an agenda in which the increase and development of opportunities for work for women was the prime concern. As we have seen, writers like Anna Jameson and Josephine Butler identified 'the diffusion of...character among the masses, by the relegation of women to some of the more important work of dealing with our mass populations' as the most appropriate area of spiritually and financially rewarding work.¹⁸ By serving the increasingly apparent needs of the social, 'superfluous women' could find their identities, make themselves necessary, through work. The appointment of educated women as factory inspectors and local

¹⁷ Lucy Deane Business Diary 29th October 1896 MRC MSS 69/1/16

¹⁸ Josephine Butler, 'Introduction' in *Women's Work and Women's Culture* ed. Josephine Butler (London: Macmillan, 1869) p. xxxi

authority sanitary inspectors was, as I shall explore shortly, the result of precisely this imagining of the instrumental role of middle-class women in ameliorating social ills, however unwelcome it was to feminist theorists in the Langham Place tradition.

Reflecting the relatively new nineteenth-century understanding of work as the site where individuals made themselves, where identity was constructed through useful productive activity, the writers associated with the Langham Place Group campaigned for the rights of women too to have access to this form of self determination. Wherever opportunities for work for women existed, these activists campaigned to protect them from the exclusionary tactics of male trades unions or legislation directed specifically at women workers.¹⁹ And where opportunities were few, yet the type of work seemed appropriate, liberal feminist organisations such as SPEW launched well-rehearsed campaigns to propel women into these previously masculine spheres of employment.²⁰

But there was an elision in this term ‘women’s work’. And despite the phrase forming the title or subject of so many feminist writings from the mid-century onwards, it was a silencing that was rarely addressed within feminism before the 1890s.²¹ The confrontation between what we would now characterise as liberal and socialist feminists during this period brought into the light the problem of difference: not the ‘sex equality versus sex difference’ debate which periodically emerges to stall feminist intellectual debate – although this too played its part in the 1890s – but differences between ‘women’

¹⁹ The campaign to prevent the prohibition of women pit brow workers during 1886-7 is the best known of these many efforts now, thanks to Angela John’s admirable work; see Angela V. John, *By the Sweat of Their Brow: Women Workers at Victorian Coal Mines* (London: Croom Helm, 1980) pp. 125-168.

²⁰ For example, the efforts of the Langham Place associate, Emily Faithfull in establishing the Victoria Press, staffed by female compositors; see Lee Holcombe, *Victorian Ladies at Work: Middle-Class Working Women in England and Wales, 1850-1914* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1973) pp. 18-20.

²¹ Feuer notes the centrality of the concept of work to the Langham Place associates and lists the following texts as indicators of this preoccupation; Barbara Leigh Smith, *Women and Work* (London: Bosworth & Harrison, 1857); Bessie Raynor Parkes, *Essays on Women’s Work* (London: Strahan, 1866); Josephine Butler, *The Education and Employment of Women* (London: Macmillan, 1868) Josephine Butler ed., *Women’s Work and Women’s Culture*; Emily Faithfull, *Women’s Work, With Special Reference to Industrial Employment* (London: Victoria Press, 1871) Feuer, 1988 p. 234

and between the nature and meaning of 'work' for different classes.²² The SPEW deployed a model in which work was a universal category: the sphere in which all developed and displayed their moral worth and independence through the interaction of freedom of contract and an unrestricted labour market. Each individual woman was to find her right place in an economy unfettered by 'sex legislation' and a labour market unaffected by exclusionary tactics. Through the removal of these barriers all women would be free to make themselves through productive activity.

The deputations of working-class women marshalled by SPEW activists to lobby ministers prior to protective labour legislation were a vital part of this rhetoric of identity between women in the sphere of work. Their bodies, bearing the marks of labour, yet undeniably feminine, 'so healthy, so comely, so *douce*, so simply-mannered, so representative of all that makes labouring womanhood sweet and wholesome', served as the corporeal negation of prevalent prescriptions concerning the limits of women's moral and physical strength in the world of employment.²³ These carefully choreographed groups of working-class women embodied the argument that participation in the public world of work did not lead to the deterioration of all that was womanly, but instead guaranteed the development of moral and physical resilience: the building of character through the act of production. Working-class women thus served as vital evidence for middle-class liberal feminists seeking to prove that they too had a natural right to work

²² As we have seen, Deane referred to Heather-Bigg and her allies as 'equal rights' activists. A strong counter argument to this liberal view used by Beatrice Webb, among others, was that men and women workers were rarely in direct competition with each other, working generally 'in entirely separate branches' of trade and industry to men. This model of difference and separation between the sexes allowed Webb to argue that women workers would not be replaced by men as a result of legislation, but that 'with this regulation, experience teaches us that women can work their way in certain occupations to a man's skill, a man's wages, and a man's sense of personal dignity and independence'. Through the acceptance of the economic basis of sex difference, women could become more like men than they ever could with a liberal model of 'equal rights'. Beatrice Webb, 'Women and the Factory Acts' *Fabian Tract* no. 67 (February, 1896) repr. *Women's Fabian Tracts* ed Sally Alexander (London: Routledge, 1988) pp. 17-32 (p. 30)

²³ *Women's Suffrage Journal*, 1st June 1887 cit. Feuer p. 247

and that idleness was not determined by sex. But an increasing number of socialists, and liberals inspired by a new concern for the health of the race and nation, argued that this model of sameness, in which the desires of and problems faced by women were identical across the economy, was the result of wilful ignorance.

In her attack upon the ‘able and devoted ladies who have usually led the cause of women’s enfranchisement, and whose strong theoretic objection to Factory legislation caused many of the most important clauses in the [1895] Bill to be rejected’, Beatrice Webb countered ‘Mrs Henry Fawcett and Miss Heather-Bigg’s...superstitious clinging’ to the classical liberal ideal of universal freedom of contract, by pointing out this difference.²⁴

Let us concede to the opponents of Factory legislation that we must do nothing to impair or limit the growing sense of personal responsibility in women; that we must seek, in every way, to increase their economic independence, and their efficiency as workers and citizens, not less than as wives and mothers; and that the best and only real means of achieving these ends is the safeguarding and protection of women’s freedom. The only question at issue is how best to obtain this freedom. When we are dealing with the propertied classes – when, for instance, it is sought to open up to women higher education or the learned professions – it is easy to see that freedom is secured by abolishing restrictions. But when we come to the relations between capital and labour an entirely new set of considerations comes into play. In the life of the wage earning class, the absence of regulation does not mean personal freedom...It is the law, in fact, which is the mother of freedom.²⁵

According to Webb, it was through acceptance of the different problems faced by working-class women on the one hand and ladies on the other, that true progress in the well-being of all ‘women’ and the nation was to be made. The trades union activist Amy

²⁴ Webb, 1896 pp. 17, 18. Webb also cultivated a relationship with the women factory inspectors, in particular Rose Squire, inviting them to a number of informal meetings at her home to discuss the prospect of organising a ‘Committee of Experts’ for publishing information on factory & industrial legislation’ during February 1896: Lucy Deane, Business Diary MRC MSS 69/1/14.

²⁵ Webb, 1896 p. 19

Hicks tried to make this point before a meeting of the Women's Emancipation Union in 1896, arguing that only 'legislation had enabled working women to call their souls their own'.²⁶ It was only through state regulation of the labour market that working-class women could achieve independence and self-possession through work: precisely those qualities that SPEW activists presumed to lie in the absence of such restrictions.

This then, was the impasse within feminism, the discursive conflict within which the women inspectors constructed their identities in the mid-1890s. The critique issued by Webb and so many others brought into focus the contrast between the liberal feminist rhetoric of speaking for or acting on behalf of one's less fortunate sisters and the actual claims of working-class women speaking for themselves. The construction of middle-class women's duty to give voice to the needs of poor and working-class women had been, as we have seen, a vital part of liberal feminist political rhetoric from the mid-century onwards. It provided an altruistic mode of demanding increased social and political representation for the category 'women', based on the imagined silent suffering of others. But once these others began to speak out, with the support of the wider trades union movement, against middle-class liberal feminists, then that key platform of feminist political campaigns was seriously undermined. During the mid 1890s therefore the liberal feminist understanding of the category 'women' was in disarray as socialist writers in particular began to hint that the rhetoric of altruism was no more than a canny disguise for the class based interests of liberal feminist activists.²⁷ The feminist articulation of

²⁶ Mrs Amy Hicks had appeared before the Royal Commission on Labour 1891-1894 as the representative of the London Ropemakers Union. The argument was recorded by Lucy Deane, who was present at the conference of the W.E.U with Adelaide Anderson. Deane saw this organisation, headed by 'Mrs Wolstoneholme Elmy & Mrs Brownlow' as 'more kindly and less prejudiced than the Women's Empl't Defence League': unlike Heather-Bigg's organisation it favoured legislation if applied equally to both male and female workers. Lucy Deane Business Diary 14th October 1896, MRC MSS 69/1/16

²⁷ Webb, 1896 p. 17, remarked 'it is curious that we seldom find these objectors to unequal laws coming forward to support even those regulations which apply equally to men and women alike', suggesting that feminist objectors to the Factory Acts were moved less by the unequal plight of their 'sisters' and more by an urgent and interested defence of liberal ideology. Socialist-feminists in the early twentieth century

'women' as facing the same problems and motivated by the same desires in the sphere of work, fractured along the lines of class. The campaign concerning work for women which had been the source of a resurgence in liberal feminist activity at the mid-century was also central in its decline forty years later.

In the narratives of feminist history a profound change in middle-class women's attitudes to class has been attributed to this moment of political realignment. Scholars such as Philippa Levine have maintained that underlying this move away from laissez-faire liberalism was not just a clearer understanding of the problems of working-class women, but also a new identification with such women as part of a coherent, transcendent sex class. Enmeshed as they were in contemporary debate on women and work, the women factory inspectors have been claimed by feminist historians as significant exemplars of this process. But feminism's need to tell this story in this way has overshadowed the continuing dis-identifications of class that underpinned the appointment and daily work of the women inspectors. Although, as I shall explore in the final section of this case-study, the women factory inspectors developed marked personal affiliations with feminism and socialism through the process of their work, their understandings of the relationship between class and gender precluded any concept similar to the mid-twentieth century political identity of feminist 'sisterhood'. This female profession was moreover marked from the very outset, and continued to be preserved by its incumbents, as the natural territory of the lady and not the working-class woman, whatever her level of expertise. The narration of this profession as a form of feminist identity formation has muted the extent to which the appointment of *lady* inspectors was contrary to the express aims of the labour movement and avoided an examination of how

worked hard to disassociate the label 'feminism' from an understanding of purely middle-class, anti-labour interest in the aftermath of this debate, see for example, Ford, 1907.

the inspectors were active agents in maintaining the distinction between themselves and the working-women they encountered. These are the two themes that I now want to explore.

ii. 'Tact and Discretion Required': Women Inspectors and the Politics of Class and Gender

The demand for women factory inspectors had been formulated and supported by the Trades Union Congress since 1878. Although, as Helen Jones has rightly pointed out, TUC reports reflect some anxiety on the part of male trades unionists regarding the appointment of women to such a position of power, by the late 1870s the Congress was content to support resolutions pressing for the appointment of 'practical working-women' as inspectors.²⁸ The resolution formed part of a broader campaign in the labour movement not only to increase the size of the factory inspectorate, but also to make it more representative: to include working-class men with personal experience of the conditions inspected and to appoint women who knew the details of female dominated trades.

When it comes to the actual appointment of the women inspectors in 1893 however, this history of campaigning and support within the trades union movement is rather a false start.²⁹ For although it was important in exerting pressure upon the Home Office to act, the nature of the role laid out for the inspectors and the individuals chosen to serve in these posts had little to do with the efforts of trades unionists. Against the constant reassertion by trades union activists of the need to appoint working-class women with personal experience of factory life the then Home Secretary, Herbert Asquith drew

²⁸ Jones, 1988 pp. 166-167

²⁹ May Abraham and Mary Paterson were appointed in May 1893, Lucy Deane and Adelaide Anderson a year later.

upon a very different idea of expertise: one which had everything to do with the association between middle-class women and social action and very little in common with the aims of the labour movement. The eventual appointment of educated ladies as factory inspectors confirmed the place of such women as the natural figures to exercise reformatory authority on behalf of working-class women. It was the culmination of more than half a century's development of middle-class women's access to power through serving the needs of the social. It finally confirmed that through such activities, middle-class women could enter established salaried professions and exert direct political influence at the highest levels.³⁰

The necessity of appointing only educated ladies to such positions of responsibility was made clear to trades union activists by the members of the Royal Commission of Labour in 1891. Before the Commission launched its full scale enquiry into the trades categorised together as Group C, (textiles, clothing, chemical, building and miscellaneous) it heard evidence concerning the desirability of appointing 'Lady Subcommissioners' to investigate and report upon the conditions of women's work in these fields. Both Commissioners and witnesses spilled over from a discussion of the need for women subcommissioners due to the 'special difficulties' presented by unorganised, female dominated trades, to the wider debate concerning the need for permanent women factory inspectors. The connection between the two roles was, as we

³⁰ The factory inspectors were not the first women civil servants at such a senior level however. Mrs Nassau Senior was appointed by the Local Government Board to inspect the education of girls at pauper schools in 1873. In 1883 Miss M Mason was appointed to report on boarding out schemes under the Poor Law and in 1890 Mrs Harrison became Inspectress of Cookery and Laundrywork at the Board of Education. But the fact that the women factory inspectors constituted a separate department, and the rapidity with which their numbers increased gave them an authority and public platform not shared by these earlier appointees.

shall see shortly, far from irrelevant, despite the chairman's efforts to keep the discussion to the matter immediately in hand.³¹

The evidence given by witnesses concerning female subcommissioners, and the reaction of the Commissioners themselves, gives form to the intense anxiety surrounding the class identity of potential appointees to posts of such key political influence. The Commissioners pushed to pin down the precise class location of each witness. They asked the former confectionary worker, Clara James if her current employment as a secretary by the Women's Trades Union Association was her only source of income, adding finally, almost in disbelief, 'You have no independent source of income I suppose? – No. You really are working for your own class? – I really am working for my own class'.³² And when Charles Booth gave evidence with regard to Clara Collet's investigation into women's work for his *Life and Labour* study, the questions regarding her status were revealing in their inherent assumptions; 'Of course Miss Collet is an educated woman? – She is an MA of London University. Had she any experience of this kind of work? – I think not'.³³

In effect, the Commissioners presented the witnesses with two options regarding this issue: either the Commission would rely entirely upon the evidence of working-class women representing various trades, with the inevitable difficulty of finding willing participants from unorganised areas of work, or the Commission would appoint educated ladies to investigate and supplement the statements of trades union representatives. In the face of this, Clara James and Amy Hicks both struggled to present a third alternative. If subcommissioners were to be appointed, James argued, 'they must be working women,

³¹ The Royal Commission reports also provide a public record of the debates surrounding the class identity of women in such posts which simply does not exist for the particular case of women factory inspectors.

³² PP 1892 xxxv

³³ PP 1892 xxxv

not ladies who do not understand the trade, because I know in several instances ladies have been into factories to write short stories about working girls, and they have not put the facts in at all'.³⁴ Clementina Black of the Women's Trade Union Association, supported the trades unionists' point of view, although a little hesitantly; 'if you could find working women sufficiently educated to do the work, they would certainly be better subcommissioners; at least when I say they would, I should think that they would certainly be better'.³⁵

Despite these assertions, the Commission eventually appointed four 'Lady Assistant Commissioners', who fitted comfortably into the class identity ascribed in the very title of the posts. Eliza Orme, Clara Collet, May Abraham and Margaret Irwin were instructed to investigate differential wage rates between men and women, the grievances of women workers, and perhaps most significantly the 'effects of women's industrial employment on their health, morality and the home'.³⁶ The conception of the assistant commissioners' role was deeply indebted to the imagining of middle-class women's expertise in uncovering and re-building the moral characters of working-class men and women. In tandem with the concerns of the labour movement regarding unfair fines and dangerous working conditions, the Commission also pursued another set of interests in which the employment of women – particularly married women – represented the risk of moral decay, the neglect of home duties and social anomie.

³⁴ PP 1892 xxxv

³⁵ PP 1892 xxxv

³⁶ PP 1893 xxxvii. Eliza Orme was a member of SPEW, the former secretary of a women's suffrage society and key member of the Women's Liberal Association. She had been active in organising the deputations and protests of the women pit-brow workers in 1886. Lucy Deane found her 'quite charming' full of 'advice & invaluable counsel' during Deane's efforts to obtain an appointment as factory inspector (27th October, 1893 MRC MS 69/1/1). The first phrase conveys Deane's conviction that Orme was indeed a proper lady in the former's relentless observation and codification of women's social status. For Collet and Abraham see Biographical Index.

Given the hold of such fears over the Commission, the association between educated ladies and altruistic social reform outweighed any desire to appease the Trades Union lobby. Witness statements in favour of the appointment of ladies as opposed to working-class women referred frequently to women social activists' involvement in clubs for factory girls, their ability to overcome the workers' distrust and the consequent moral and practical improvements rendered in the girls' daily lives.³⁷ As we have seen, the depiction of middle-class women's philanthropic agency among women factory workers had exerted a powerful hold over the imagination of the reading public since the mid-1880s, when a new generation of writers turned their attention to the conditions of the East End working-girl. So prevalent was this interest in factory girls among women writers that the trades unionist Clara James made an immediate association between the presence of ladies in the factory and their desire to write stories from the lives of the workers (ones which bore little relation to the actual experiences of the women).³⁸

The connection between philanthropy and the inspection of women's workplaces was just as important in terms of practical experience, however, as it was in this theoretical ideal of social regeneration. In the course of her investigation of women's work for the Royal Commission, Clara Collet, for example, relied extensively upon the organisers of philanthropic clubs for factory workers to give her access to working-class women in various trades.³⁹ Using once more the strategies she had employed during her

³⁷ See for example the evidence of Mr Edward Shortt and Mr Charles Tees, Charles Booth and Clementina Black PP 1892 xxxv. During the debate surrounding the appointment of factory inspectors a few years later, Asquith was doubtless aware of his future wife's involvement in precisely this form of social action in the East End, see above pp. 117- 120.

³⁸ See above p. 58 for the effect of Walter Besant's depiction of such work in *The Children of Gibeon* (1887), one among numerous texts of the 1880s dealing with this group of workers.

³⁹ PP 1893 xxxvii. For her report on the conditions of work in Liverpool and Manchester for example, Collet interviewed 79 witnesses in all: 28 employers; 24 tailoresses; 11 factory workers; five dressmakers 'and the remaining 11 included persons brought into daily contact with working women and girls in religious and social work'. Lucy Deane employed a similar technique of outreach for the Special Enquiry into Dangerous Trades in 1895. Not only did she enlist the help of the residents of the Women's University

research for Charles Booth, Collet reported women philanthropists' opinions of the characters of women in various trades, and compared this to her own conclusions.⁴⁰ She drew upon the expertise she herself had gained through her involvement with the C.O.S., deriving comparative standards of living from the information she had gathered from applicants to the Soho District Office in 1888.⁴¹ Though the women assistant commissioners agreed that 'women and girls lie[d] dreadfully' about the conditions of their employment, the reports that the ladies produced still illustrated numerous concerns surrounding the health and welfare of 'factory girls' and sweated workers, verified by what were perceived as more reliable sources.⁴² The quality of work produced by Collet and her colleagues on the Royal Commission on Labour and the areas of abuse and grievance that they highlighted were vital in affirming both the need for women inspectors and the capacity of educated ladies to undertake such employment.

In January 1893 Asquith finally announced his intention to appoint two women inspectors of factories before a large delegation of campaigners. Amy Hicks and Clara James were present and once again they insisted on the need for working-class women in such posts, but such demands met with muted support from the women's organisations represented in the deputation.⁴³ In April, 1893 these claims were again overruled when May Abraham and Mary Paterson became the first women factory inspectors.⁴⁴ The

Settlement in her inquiry, but she also encouraged them to organise a petition calling for the classification of fur-pulling as a dangerous trade.

⁴⁰ PP 1893 xxxvii. In the course Collet's investigations in the Black Country 'Several [philanthropic] ladies informed me that the 'screw girls' at Smethwick had a reputation for coarse language and immorality, and believed that it must be in some way due to the conditions of their work. This I feel absolutely certain is not the case...although there seemed to me a large enough number of coarse-looking women to bring discredit on the 'screw girls' generally, yet the majority were very respectable-looking women'.

⁴¹ PP 1893 xxxvii

⁴² Eliza Orme cit. Lucy Deane Business Diary 27th October 1893 MRC MS 69/1/1

⁴³ PRO HO 45/9818/B8031. The delegation consisted of deputations from the Women's Liberal Federation, the WTUA, the World Women's Christian Temperance League, the WTUL and the TUC Parliamentary Committee.

⁴⁴ See Biographical Index

duties of women factory inspectors 'may appear to be simple', wrote an observer for the *Queen*, 'but in their execution such qualities of judgement, tact and discretion are required as are rarely found save amongst women of highly educated minds'. And if this suggestion did not make the exclusion of trades unionists clear enough, the writer added 'the maximum of effective work would, I believe, be secured by the appointment of women who have no interest of class or party to serve'.⁴⁵ As I will argue shortly, only educated ladies could hope to conform to this model of disinterested devotion to the enforcement of legislation.

As the reports of the Lady Assistant Commissioners entered the public domain, the Kensington Vestry took a decision that echoed this belief in the capacity of educated ladies to exercise beneficent surveillance over the workplace. The Factory Act of 1891 had given the responsibility for the sanitary condition of workshops to local authorities, and the MOH for Kensington, T. Orme Dudfield complained in his monthly reports that the consequent inspection of the numerous dressmaking workshops in the district took up far too much of the Sanitary Inspectors' time.⁴⁶ He suggested that the Vestry appoint two women inspectors solely for this task, to protect 'the interests of a numerous and somewhat helpless class of people, young females' employed in Kensington.⁴⁷ Dudfield suggested that the particular skill of women inspectors would lie in 'bringing about more wholesome conditions of labour to the special advantage of the workers whose interests can be safeguarded only by own of their own sex'.⁴⁸ The Vestry concurred with Dudfield's opinion and in October 1893 Lucy Deane and Rose Squire took up the posts of

⁴⁵ 'An Onlooker', 'The Appointment of Women Factory Inspectors' *Queen* 4th February 1893 p. 197

⁴⁶ The Factory and Workshop Act of 1891 Section 3 (2) gave local Sanitary Authorities the same powers of entry and inspection in workshops as the Factory Inspectorate. Kensington Local History Library Monthly Report of MOH, June, 1893

⁴⁷ KLHL Monthly Report of MOH, June, 1893

⁴⁸ KLHL Monthly Report of MOH, December, 1895

Women Inspectors of Workrooms for the salary of £60 for a six-month trial appointment.⁴⁹

Equipped with diplomas from the National Health Society and experience of lecturing on hygiene and nursing respectively, Lucy Deane and Rose Squire divided the district of Kensington between them and started inspecting.⁵⁰ Seeing their true role as ‘educators’ of the women workers, Deane and Squire faced down the hostility of proprietors and forewomen, opening windows, searching out illegal overtime workers hidden away on their entrance, checking eating and sanitary arrangements.⁵¹ Despite the seemingly mundane nature of their work, the two women were inundated with requests for interviews from journals and newspapers.⁵² The decision of the Kensington Vestry coming so soon after the appointment of the women factory inspectors seemed to affirm the place of ladies in the professions; a new area of authority was laid out for such women as for the first time ladies were imagined taking possession of the factory floor. Deane and Squire soon tired of such press attention however, declining further interviews, much to Dudfield’s satisfaction, who concluded ‘he had ladies & not women only as his inspectors’ – the embodiment of quiet, selfless efficiency.⁵³

Indebted though it was to the belief in the lady’s unique capacity to effect physical and moral improvements in the lives of working-class women, the actual duties of the

⁴⁹ Although the 1890s represented a period of growth for the employment of women as local authority sanitary inspectors, the particular responsibility of the Kensington women inspectors for workshops was unusual. The NHS paid for Lucy Deane to travel to Manchester in early 1894 to find out about the women sanitary inspectors employed there. She noted with disappointment that these were more ‘Official District Visitors’ than inspectors. Whilst retaining women sanitary inspectors throughout the period of this study, the Kensington Vestry gave them increasing responsibility for home health visiting, employing a number of ‘Health Visitors’ (at a lower salary) to complement this work. This follows the pattern of ‘feminisation’ and downgrading of women sanitary inspectors’ work outlined in Celia Davis, ‘The Health Visitor as Mother’s Friend: A Woman’s Place in Public Health, 1900-1914’ *Social History of Medicine*, 1 (1988) 39-59.

⁵⁰ For Squire’s background see Biographical Index.

⁵¹ Lucy Deane Business Diary 16th February 1894 MRC MS 69/1/3

⁵² After the fourth request for an interview in a month, Deane concluded ‘a little interviewing goes a long way! & I am sick thereof’ MRC MS 69/1/2.

⁵³ Lucy Deane Business Diary 29th January 1894 MRC MS 69/1/2

women sanitary inspectors and factory inspectors were very different from the tradition of middle-class women's philanthropic work that I have outlined elsewhere in this thesis. Despite the methods of categorisation and analysis used by the lady rent collectors and C.O.S. workers in the previous two chapters, at heart the work of both groups relied upon the effect of an encounter between two individuals. The lady met the poor tenant or applicant, heard their story and then acted as she saw fit in an effort to improve their character. Whilst working for the numerous special enquiries conducted into various aspects of women's work during this period, the women factory inspectors' work did approach something similar to this. The stories of struggle against unjust employers, fatal working environments and excessive hours – all these were transcribed by the women inspectors, copied down in hastily convened meetings, in cottages and slum courts throughout Britain, and written into reports demanding further protection for women workers. It was these meetings between the poorest of women in unorganised trades and the 'government ladies' outside the workplace that seems to have left the strongest mark on the women inspectors. It is these far more personal encounters which the women inspectors, at a distance of thirty odd years, took as part of their own stories in writing their memoirs.

But the more routine inspection work carried out by the women sanitary inspectors and, for most of their time, the women factory inspectors was a very different matter. At the end of their six month trial appointment, Deane and Squire had inspected and registered respectively 209 and 239 premises across Kensington.⁵⁴ On the days devoted to inspection, the sanitary inspectors would cover four or more workplaces, tackling managers, inspecting the sanitary state of the building, giving advice and writing official

⁵⁴ KLHL Monthly Report of MOH April 1894

notices of improvements to be made. Deane was surprised to learn from May Abraham that the latter even spoke to the women workers in her capacity as factory inspector 'which hitherto I have seldom done – there being no occasion'.⁵⁵ In both official and private accounts of the sanitary and factory inspectors' regular duties, the women workers appear as anonymous units, numbers noted under the inspectors level gaze to add up to breaches of regulations; too many bodies, in the wrong place at the wrong times.

In 1902, Hilda Martindale was appointed as a junior inspector in the factory department. 'No one could have known less about industrial conditions, the intricacies of machinery, factory workers and the Factory Acts', she confessed disarmingly, but 'I could claim to know something about the techniques of inspection'.⁵⁶ Martindale cited her experience as an inspector of boarded out children for Dr Barnardo's and the Children's Country Holiday Fund as the source of her expertise in this area.⁵⁷ As Martindale saw it, these techniques of inspection comprised the skills of reading bodies and environments, of observation, transcription and investigation. Those modes of knowledge and ways of seeing outlined in the previous chapter were therefore vital for the work of the women factory and sanitary inspectors. But something quite different was at stake in the routine duties of the women inspectors of factories and workshops.

For these women inspectors were not tracing a moral aetiology from the women workers before them. The working-class women in this instance were not the direct

⁵⁵ Lucy Deane Business Diary 27th April 1894 MRC MS 69/1/4. This seems all the more surprising given Deane's agreement with Squire that they were the 'educators' of the women workers and the argument used by supporters of both women factory and sanitary inspectors that such appointees would naturally encourage greater communication from the workers.

⁵⁶ Martindale, 1944 p. 73

⁵⁷ A background in philanthropic work still continued to be the standard experience required for women factory inspectors into the early twentieth century. Constance Smith was appointed as a senior lady inspector in 1913, after fifteen years of working for the Christian Social Union and the National Organisation of Girl's Clubs in London. Only a few months before her appointment she had been part of a delegation lobbying for the extension of protective labour legislation and the appointment of more women inspectors. See Tuckwell, 1931; PRO LAB 14/196

objects of the reforming gaze. Special enquiries apart, the ladies focussed upon proprietors, foremen and women or local trades union representatives in their efforts to pin down failings and achieve reform. The factory workers appear in these accounts as always already fixed, given their stable identity through their place, times and pay rates of work. Even in the instances when the women workers appeared as witnesses for the defence or prosecution in cases brought by the lady inspectors, even then the factory workers themselves scarcely appear in the departmental records and recollections. Instead the women inspectors focussed upon the bullying forewoman, or the employer threatening dismissal as the true objects of moral inadequacy, putting undue pressure upon their employees.

The direct, individual encounter between ladies and the 'poor' that has been such a feature in the two previous case studies simply did not happen in the course of the women factory inspector's routine work. The structure and bureaucracy of this particular profession made such a meeting, imbued with the effects of 'personal influence', unnecessary and undesirable. But this is not to say that codes of class (and gender) ceased to be important in the women's conceptualisation of their personal and professional identities – far from it. For the women inspectors continued to draw upon such resources to reinforce their authority and fix their identity as the only group suitable to carry out such duties to the nation and to women factory workers. Only this time the lines of difference were drawn between themselves and 'respectable', politically active working-class women as potential professional competitors, and the established corps of male inspectors.

iii. **‘No interest of class or party to serve’? Professionalism, Altruism and the Construction of Feminist Identity**

A few months after she took up her appointment in Kensington, Lucy Deane found herself the object of renewed interest and speculation when she and Adelaide Anderson were nominated as women inspectors in the *Factory Department of the Home Office*.⁵⁸ The addition of these two new workers gave the women inspector’s division a critical mass and distinct, autonomous identity which was preserved and expanded until 1921.⁵⁹ From the very establishment of the women’s branch of the *Factory Department* the first four women inspectors strove to distinguish themselves as professionals from both their male counterparts and working-class women trades unionists. Based (with the exception of Mary Paterson) in London, the women inspectors were sent to inspect women’s workplaces in districts throughout Britain and Ireland: districts which already had male inspectors in place, who invariably resented the visits of these women as ‘Peripatetic Spies & Stirrers up’, sent by the Chief Inspector.⁶⁰ But the women inspectors had no compunction in noting the inadequacy of the efforts of some of the men inspectors – indeed playing up these weaknesses became a vital part of the women’s belief in their indispensability and professional superiority.

Constructing their work as the answer to the cries of abused women workers everywhere, the women inspectors invoked the moral framework of altruism and social reform to assert their place in the Civil Service. At an impromptu meeting at Lady Dilke’s house, May Abraham outlined to Lucy Deane the reason for the hostility of the men inspectors. It was pure jealousy, Abraham decided, for ‘many of them have been lax in

⁵⁸ See Biographical Index for Adelaide Anderson.

⁵⁹ By 1908 there were 16 women inspectors in the *Factory Department*.

⁶⁰ Lucy Deane Business Diary 10th January 1895

their work, thro' probably, want of enthusiasm and thro' having been appointed merely as a means of livelihood'.⁶¹ The male inspectors could simply never aspire to the altruism of the lady inspectors. They were, as Deane frequently underscored in her diaries, often 'common and rather narrow' men, whose wives were not ladies. With such uncertain social status, forced to earn a living and maintain relations with both local workers and proprietors, the male inspectors could not match what the women inspectors represented as their own lofty (financial) disinterest.⁶² The cause, the belief and the enthusiasm for the ideals of their work fuelled the self-construction of the women inspectors as pioneers and fearless reformers.

The long running friction between Lucy Deane and Captain Bevan, an inspector with responsibility for the East Midlands, came to a head in January 1895.⁶³ Deane travelled up to Nottingham to provide the routine bi-annual inspection of women's workplaces there and found the resident inspector, Bevan, waiting to escort her. Deane found the 'sanitation very bad, ventilation bad' at Whitehall's factory and 'did speak about opening windows at mealtimes to forewoman before Capt. B. (wh. I found was a great offence...)' Upon meeting Bevan for dinner later, Deane was met with a 'furious tirade'; 'he was an inspector of 20 years standing & I was undermining his authority in the District going into places & finding fault where he had never done so. (It seems MOH had complained of that particular factory & offered to go over it with him & he refused!)'.

⁶¹ Lucy Deane Business Diary 6th April 1894

⁶² This rhetoric of altruism did not prevent the women inspectors from campaigning for pay increases however. May Abraham attempted to negotiate a raise with Asquith in 1895, pointing out that none of the women inspectors could earn more than £300 p.a. compared to Clara Collet (in her new post as labour correspondent at the Board of Trade) who earned £500 and Miss Mason who earned £350 with the Local Government Board. By 1908 the principal lady inspector could earn up to £600 and the senior inspectors from £300-£450. Although considerably lower than equivalent male salaries, the senior lady inspectors earned approximately 2 ½ times the salary of female high school teachers, health lecturers, sanitary inspectors or C.O.S. District Secretaries.

⁶³ Deane was warned by May Abraham in May 1894 that Bevan was 'horrid' and on her first visit to Nottingham in June Deane decided that he was 'jealous & cheating...cruel & spiteful' and his inspection work very poor. MRC MS 69/1/4

Deane congratulated herself on her tact and restraint later that evening, 'I said very little & would not quarrel with him suggested referring matter to Chief [Inspector of Factories], that I was not Assistant Inspector & had not exceeded my instructions'.⁶⁴ Satisfied by her calm, firm stand, and confident of the support of the Chief Inspector of Factories, Sprague Oram, Deane drew upon the two modes of authority that were, I would argue, central to the professional identities of the women factory inspectors.

The first of these was, as I have suggested, the moral framework of altruism and its relationship to the idea of the female professional. In this instance, Deane represented her battle for higher standards for women factory workers as a selfless mission to enforce the good and the right, regardless of the reactions it might provoke from the resident male inspector. She was secure in her sense of adhering to a higher code than any Bevan could hope to understand, and stood patiently, assured of the justice of her actions, a mute martyr before his tirade. By maintaining this air of detachment from the petty 'jealousy' and territorialism of inspectors such as Bevan, the women inspectors could present themselves as simply more professional than the men themselves: selfless devotees to the perfect enforcement and administration of the Factory Acts. The women inspectors believed that Sprague Oram preserved the autonomy of their work precisely because of this differentiation, depending 'on the [male] Inspectors' standard... being raised by us'.⁶⁵

This mode of professional authority owed much to the efforts of women social activists over the previous decade who had struggled to define themselves as professionals in their chosen field in spite of not holding salaried posts. The difference between the professional and the amateur, they averred, lay in training, application and

⁶⁴ Lucy Deane Business Diary 16th January 1895 MRC MS 69/1/9

⁶⁵ Note of meeting between Lucy Deane, Adelaide Anderson and May Abraham 10th January 1895 MRC MS 69/1/9

the spirit in which work was undertaken, not the receipt of an annual income over a certain level. In the absence of the clear markers of orthodox training and selection routes, preferment, promotion and employment structures, the individual self-construction of the lady as a professional was what made her a professional. This mode of becoming a professional lady, as we have seen in the previous two case-studies, made a strength out of being independent from established structures of authority and drew confidence from representations of heroism and the pioneer spirit in the midst of conflict. It was in these (self) representations that the masculine identifications and asexual imagings of women social activists took shape during the 1880s and 1890s.⁶⁶

But of course the field of professionalisation for the women factory inspectors was radically different from that of women social workers and housing managers. Quite simply, it was an area that was already professionalised and occupied by men. It had its own, relatively long established structures and practices and despite the relative autonomy of the women inspectors' branch during this period, the women were regarded as in direct competition with the men. In the light of this, the women factory inspectors sought to differentiate themselves from the male inspectors and reinforce a distinct area of work and form of professionalism. Far from playing with masculine identifications, this opposition between men and women of (broadly) similar class positions in the same field of work led to the formation of distinct feminist identities on the part of the women factory inspectors: an emphasis upon a shared sexed identity expressed in opposition to men.

The second form of authority that the women inspectors relied upon in the course of their work lay in precisely this feminist differentiation of themselves from the male inspectors. In the dominant logic of gender in the 1890s, the greater the divide that lay

⁶⁶ See above pp. 158-166.

between the female and male inspectors in their attitudes and working practices, the more essential was the separate existence of the women's department. For the appointment of the women inspectors and the continued political support for their work in the Home Office and beyond was founded on the belief that they, as women, could achieve things that were simply impossible for the men. Through their 'intuitive and instinctive knowledge which...a woman necessarily has of the wants of her own sex' the women inspectors could implement more complete and effective surveillance of women's workplaces than the male inspectors.⁶⁷ The women workers would 'naturally' talk to women inspectors with greater ease regarding sanitary arrangements and the moral conditions of their workplace and knowing that the women's department existed solely to address their concerns, they would be more eager to relate their true terms of employment.

It was not just Asquith and Sprague Oram's support for this principle that fortified the women inspectors in their daily dealings with factory proprietors, forewomen and their male colleagues. The women inspectors knew that they could rely upon a diverse range of philanthropic and political bodies to continue campaigning for the preservation and expansion of their department throughout the 1890s and early 1900s. In the aftermath of the 1895 Factory Act and facing an uncertain future with both a new Chief Inspector and Home Secretary, the women inspectors decided to launch their own subtle strategy to protect their future. With this new political landscape in view, Lucy Deane reminded her colleagues that 'our main strength will lie in outside influence' from now on. The women inspectors agreed to find an author for 'a series of implied [?] articles in one of the magazines, only very indirectly treating of us and apparently referring only to some analogous subjects but showing the whole case for female inspection and for similar

⁶⁷ Taken from the Asquith's address as Home Secretary to the delegation in favour of women factory inspectors PRO HO 45/9818/B8031.

powers in female inspectors'.⁶⁸ Accordingly, Rose Squire approached Beatrice Webb who had already expressed an interest in the subject and she in turn introduced the inspectors to Lady Frederick Cavendish who was willing to write the article. Webb hosted a dinner 'to show us off to Lady F.C. as harmless, lady-like and tactful and not likely to create an uproar' and to persuade her into penning a piece on the subject.⁶⁹

But despite all these efforts, the women inspectors' resolution on the retirement of Sprague Oram, as recorded by Deane, still had the sound of a department on a war footing against their male colleagues.

In view of the fact that [the] men inspectors are speaking openly against us everywhere & creating a public opinion against us...our only weapon is to enlist as many influential and political people on our 'side' as possible, to speak & lecture about us as can.⁷⁰

It was in this situation that the centralisation of the women inspectors in their own London office was vital. It was an anomaly that the women inspectors fought hard to defend over the next two decades, naming the difficulty of acquiring 'even...ordinary social acquaintanceships in a strange locality, with no colleague or fellow worker at hand' for the 'quiet, well mannered women' in the Factory Department.⁷¹ Encoded in this concern for the emotional well being of women inspectors posted over the country was, I would argue, a fear of the loss of political influence that the women inspectors could exert in the metropolis through access to numerous social networks. I have outlined the number of individual politicians and reformers the women had contact with, over and above the unquestioning efforts of the WTUL and similar organisations. Such access to personal influence and political networks in the capital was seen as key to the survival of the

⁶⁸ Lucy Deane Business Diary 15th July 1895 MRC MS 69/1/12

⁶⁹ Lucy Deane Business Diary 20th February 1896 MRC MS 69/1/14

⁷⁰ Lucy Deane Business Diary 19th March 1896 MRC MS 69/1/14

⁷¹ Memo from Adelaide Anderson to Chief Inspector of Factories 13th September 1905 PRO HO 45/10327/132951

women's department.⁷² The ever-expanding political articulation of the category 'women', as mothers, workers and potential voters provided a social climate in which the abolition of the women's inspectorate made no sense.

In many ways the case of the women factory inspectors fits the general theory of professionalisation better than might be expected from the dramatic narratives of ongoing struggle and opposition that we have encountered here. As numerous theorists of the sociology of the professions have noted, the demarcation of a new professional class relies upon the patronage and support of an older elite in its rise to dominance and obtains subsequently the broad consent of public opinion – the taken-for-granted acceptance of the necessity of such a new profession. Lucy Deane was only too aware of the importance of the support of established aristocratic and political elites in securing her nomination to the Factory Department in 1894. Jointly recommended for the post by the National Health Society with an old rival, Alice Ravenhill, Deane cast around for ways to obtain the nomination for herself. Both Deane and Ravenhill had received introductions to Lady Dilke through Miss de Pledge of the Chelsea Infirmary and Ravenhill confided in Deane that she hoped to gain the appointment through the extra advantage of connections to 'Dr Thorne Thorne (Local Gov't Board)...& Sir Bernard Collins, Duchess of Albany's Equerry or something'.⁷³ Less than pleased by the information, Deane set to work, writing first to her acquaintance Lady Mary Hardinge, a lady in waiting to the Queen

⁷² When the women inspectors were regionalised in 1908 and Rose Squire moved to Manchester to become Senior Lady Inspector in the Northern Division, she felt that finally the support for the lady inspectors in the provinces had come to match that in the metropolis: 'Social service in every form was then attracting women of all classes and various degrees of education in Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds and Bradford, and we of the Civil Service were eagerly consulted as 'experts' on much that was agitating the awakening civic sense of women at that period'. Squire, 1927 p. 184

⁷³ Ravenhill also reported that she explained to Sprague Oram in a private meeting (incorrectly) that Deane and Squire were only Assistant Sanitary Inspectors in Kensington. Deane's chagrin was only increased by the fact that she had called on Alexander Redgrave, the previous Chief Inspector of Factories earlier in the day who, unsurprisingly given his vehement objection to the prospect of women inspectors during his time in office, had refused to help her. Lucy Deane, Business Diary 6th December 1893 MRC MS 69/1/2

and a friend of Margot Tennant.⁷⁴ The latter promised in reply that she ‘would say what she could for me to Mr Asquith – i.e. nothing’, Deane noted sourly.⁷⁵

A few months later Deane renewed her efforts after a conversation with Miss Lankester, the head of the NHS. Lankester reported that Asquith and HJ Tennant had told her that whilst one nomination had gone to ‘a Girton lady’, Adelaide Anderson, the other was between Alice Ravenhill and Deane herself. Lankester recommended Deane as the candidate with more suitable experience, but Tennant added ominously ‘Miss Ravenhill’s father & mine were old friends & the Duchess of Albany has written for her’.⁷⁶ Deane immediately ‘wrote to the Hon. Mrs Otway Cuffe enclosing a letter she is to send on if she likes to Lady Manners who knows Mr Asquith intimately’.⁷⁷ As it turned out this last effort was unnecessary: Deane had already been given the nomination, and she and Anderson went on to sit the special exam designed for the only two candidates for the two new posts.

Such an unquestioning reliance upon the influence of aristocratic connections seems a little odd in the age that has been identified as the origin of modern meritocracy based upon selection on ability.⁷⁸ But as David Cannadine has pointed out, despite the official introduction of competitive examination for entry to the Home Civil Service in 1870, the senior ranks of Home Office officials at the turn of the century were still overwhelmingly patrician.⁷⁹ Certainly, the noble patronesses acknowledged by Deane and Abraham can have done them no harm in the eyes of Permanent Secretaries such as Sir

⁷⁴ See David Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) p. 246, p. 281-282 for a discussion of the influence of the Hardinge family. Margot Tennant was shortly to become the second Mrs Asquith, and was a sister of the Home Office Secretary HJ Tennant.

⁷⁵ Lucy Deane Business Diary 29th December 1893 MRC MS 69/1/2

⁷⁶ Lucy Deane Business Diary 5th March 1894 MRC MS 69/1/3

⁷⁷ Lucy Deane Business Diary 6th March 1894 MRC MS 69/1/3

⁷⁸ Harold Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England since 1880* (London: Routledge, 1989) p. 155

⁷⁹ Cannadine, 1990 p. 240 points out that the Home Office finally complied with the Order in Council regarding competitive examination in 1873, but ‘the first competitive entrant only arrived in 1880, and patronage appointments continued nevertheless’.

Godfrey Lushington and Sir Kenelm Digby, themselves scions of nobility.⁸⁰ And to a great extent the rhetoric of disinterested altruism deployed by the lady inspectors identified them more closely with these patrician mandarins, with their air of genteel dilettantism, than the ‘bewhiskered little men’ who ‘dropped their H’s’ in the Factory Department itself.⁸¹

This particular story of elite personal patronage has received little attention in recent histories of the women’s factory inspectorate. It complicates the narratives that attribute the appointment of the women inspectors to the growing engagement between feminism and the labour movement in the late nineteenth century. The question that remains is whether the elite-led nature of the women’s factory inspectorate invalidates the assumption that such work led to a change in the political analyses of the women involved. Tracing the changing political identifications of Lucy Deane seems to suggest, at first glance, that the narrative of middle-class women adopting a new analysis of class from the experience of industrial work remains credible despite this. Although initially uncertain about the extension of protective legislation, as we have seen, within a few years of taking up her work as an inspector, Deane engaged in covert campaigning for exactly these ends. Accompanying Adelaide Anderson, who had been active in the suffrage movement before her appointment to the women’s factory inspectorate, Lucy Deane attended meetings of the Women’s Emancipation Union and the Women’s Employment Defence League, attempting to win feminist support for restrictions on

⁸⁰ Cannadine, 1990 p. 241. Sir Godfrey Lushington, Permanent Secretary 1885-1895, was succeeded by Sir Kenelm Digby, who held the position until 1903. ‘With these two men in charge, the office retained its family and feudal atmosphere: the pace of life was unhurried, and the intellectual level generally undistinguished’. Deane and Abraham agreed that Digby was ‘the great standby’ for their support with the appointment of Matthew Ridley and Dr Whitelegge as the indifferent, if not actively hostile, Home Secretary and Chief Inspector of Factories in 1895.

⁸¹ For the different working attitudes of the aristocratic and new middle-class civil servants at the turn of the century see Cannadine, 1989 p. 244. The comment on the Factory Inspectors is, of course, Lucy Deane’s. MRC MS 69/1/4

women's labour. Seeking out social activists in the Children's Country Holiday Fund and at the Women's University Settlement, Deane impressed upon them the need of further legislation to protect female workers and their families.

In the long term, support for her department's work came primarily from socialist and liberal imperialist organisations, and Deane sought to educate herself in these areas, ordering books from the Clarion organisation, seeking out the I.L.P activist Isabella Ford and meeting through her working-class women campaigners. Deane even ventured little sallies against her Honourable aunts, outraging them by arguing for land nationalisation, or in more serious moments she attended meetings of the Women's Co-operative Guild and was deeply impressed by 'the eagerness of the women to learn business procedures & habits, to learn to express themselves'.⁸²

But such political overtures were (and are) far from the same thing as the rhetoric of identity and 'sisterhood' underpinning second-wave feminism. For in the classic mode of professionalisation, the women factory inspectors went on to demarcate and refine their area of expertise, policing entry to their ranks through increasingly official qualifying procedures. Above all else, the women inspectors and their key supporters agreed, the work was not appropriate for working-class women at any level. Deploying those codes of class and gender that distinguished the ladies from the women, they were 'unanimous': 'working-class women no go ...(tact so essential now)'. Even those working-class women performing broadly similar duties, such as Miss Hawksley, a Sanitary Inspector in Nottingham, were judged unsuitable candidates for the Home Office: 'she has no tact & is fussy'.⁸³ And as to working-class women trades unionists, Eliza Orme had pointed out to Deane that 'the gov't. cannot employ a 'party' woman strongly connected with any cause

⁸² Lucy Deane Business Diary 23rd March 1895 MRC MS 69/1/10; 5th October 1896 MRC MS 69/1/16

⁸³ 12th June 1894 MRC MS 69/1/5

in a matter requiring such tact as a Factory Insp. in touch with employees & employers'.⁸⁴ Working-class women could never achieve the restraint, the disinterest and the calm detachment that was so essential to the imagining of ladies exercising authority in the name of the state over the industrial bourgeoisie.

The irony is, of course, that the lady inspectors relied heavily upon the influence of political organisations for their support: organisations that took for granted the particular interest of the inspectors in the welfare of factory 'girls' rather than proprietors. But the idea of altruism that underpinned the separate existence of the women inspectors department during the period of this study had become a political neutral code of class (and gender). Working for the social had become the profession and not merely the duty of the lady. It was a profession that needed to keep the ladies separate from the women in order to justify the continued necessity of their work.

⁸⁴ 27th October 1893 MRC MS 69/1/1

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Conclusion: Speaking for Others and the Burdens of Feminist History

In *Robert Elsmere*, the novel that embodies, perhaps more than any other, the social and spiritual anxieties of the late nineteenth century, the cynical anti-hero takes a moment to reflect upon the changing intellectual preoccupations of his era in the company of the eponymous hero.

‘It seems to me’ said Langham, musing, ‘that in my youth people talked about Ruskin; now they talk about drains’
 ‘Quite right too. Dirt and drains, Catherine says I have gone mad on them. It’s all very well, but they are the foundation of a sound religion’
 ‘Dirt, drains and Darwin,’ said Langham meditatively, taking up Darwin’s *Earthworms*, which lay on the study table beside him, side by side with a volume of Grant Allen’s ‘Sketches’¹

The young curate Elsmere’s pursuance of dirt and drains are but the first sticky steps he takes on the route, via those carefully displayed texts of Darwinism, proper and Darwinism, Social and the ministrations of a (thinly disguised) T.H. Green, to resigning Holy Orders. To the distress of his devout and spiritual wife, Catherine, Elsmere is called instead to devote his life to secular social service in the East End of London, founding the ‘Brotherhood of the New Life’. Dirt and drains might indeed form sound foundations for a religion, but this was the new religion of humanity.

Why Ward’s narrative needs Catherine as the keeper of the spiritual flame whilst Robert builds drains and transfers the ‘emotion of self-sacrificing service from God to man’, is a question that really takes us right back to Ruskin.² Those couplets of public

¹ Mrs Humphry Ward, *Robert Elsmere* (London: Smith and Elder, 1888) p. 170

² Beatrice Webb, 1926 p. 112

and private, material and spiritual, worldly and pure, so the list continues, exerted a visceral hold over bourgeois moral imagination in the later nineteenth century. And Ruskin's celebration of the qualities 'Of Queen's Gardens' provided the abiding formulation of woman's (but really, the lady's) ideal moral and spiritual authority, preserved from the taint of battle – and bespattering by dirt or drains.³ Woman, in this understanding, was at her most powerful in preserving peace, faith and spirituality in an age of conflict and doubt.

This discourse of gender difference (passing as 'separate spheres', 'the angel in the house', 'domestic ideology') has in its turn exercised a fascination over present day feminist historians, who have, quite rightly asserted its significance in nineteenth-century thought. Most recently though, historians and cultural critics have come to question the usefulness of this ideal-type as a means of analysing and understanding the lived lives of women, emphasising also its indefiniteness, its multivalent deployment by both feminists and anti-feminists in the nineteenth century. There were other models, or at least different modalities of this discourse of gender difference, around in the late nineteenth century. For as Mrs Humphry Ward knew well, young ladies in the 1880s were also treading a path away from Ruskin, through dirt, drains and Social Darwinism to a life of service in London's East End (though of course, not necessarily discarding established religion on the way).

In this sense the foregoing chapters have been an attempt to place an account of the changing imagination of gender identities within a quite familiar narrative of cultural history at the turn of the century. The changing understandings of citizenship, altruism, secularism, Darwinism, socialism and above all, duty, have been (and were at the time)

³ John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies: Two Lectures* (London: Smith and Elder, 1864)

elucidated by numerous scholars: the route from Ruskin to sanitary aid in the East End has been well mapped. With a renewed interest in the concept of citizenship amongst present-day feminists, the place of middle-class women in changing and being changed by social theories of duty in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has also received a significant amount of attention. Jane Lewis, Julia Parker and Philippa Levine, for example, have all indicated the significance of this conceptualisation of social service in the campaigns and work of women social activists and feminists in the late nineteenth century. And all three scholars have noted that the (middle) class identity of women social activists and feminists was the necessary foundation for their actions and their particular understandings of duty.

So why is this thesis still trammelled by the anxiety that there are so many questions unasked concerning the relationship between duty, class identities, social action and feminism (apart from the need of originality that is a condition of academic production)? Perhaps drawing a parallel will answer this best and for the last time. Although the particular comparison I want to use here is, as many friendly critics have pointed out to me, a problematic one, it is also the one that began (or begat) this work.⁴ I will therefore end at the beginning.

In *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915*, Antoinette Burton addresses the relationship between feminism and imperialism during approximately the same period of history as I have explored in this thesis. Burton examines the representations of Indian women in feminist periodicals and in Josephine Butler's Indian campaign, among other sites, and uses such representations to 'interrogate the basis of feminist history and, with it, the very bases of feminist

⁴ My thanks to Marsha Henry and Jenny Antonio for many useful discussions concerning this issue over the last four years

questioning itself'. Throughout her work, Burton 'confronts the historical racism of middle-class Western feminism', its imbrication in imperialist culture and its reliance upon notions of white, Western bourgeois supremacy.⁵ Nowhere, Burton argues, is this more apparent than in the recurrent figure of the Indian woman as 'Other': a passive helpless figure, demanding the dutiful interventions of white Western feminists to bring her up to the social subjectivity of her more civilised sisters, freed from the zenana, suttee or child marriage.

As she suggests in conclusion, such a representation of British feminists' inalienable duty to 'speak for' other, less fortunate women 'raises important questions about the conditions under which women's citizenship and, more particularly middle-class British feminist subjectivity was formed in the late Victorian and Edwardian eras'.⁶ And Burton adds, almost as an aside, that "'Speaking for" Indian women seemed as natural to many liberal middle-class British feminists as did "speaking for" working-class women'.⁷ These representations, and the relations of power inherent in them are, she argues, part of the identity of modern feminism: an uncomfortable burden feminism still carries in its own history.

As I hope I have made clear in the earlier chapters of this thesis, 'speaking for' working-class women did indeed play a profoundly important role in British feminist political rhetoric from the mid-century onwards. It was central to the formation of liberal feminist identity and the self-construction of middle-class feminists as dutiful citizens in need of political representation in order to effect social change. Through this belief in their duty to speak (and act) for others – in particular poor, women and children –

⁵ Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994) p. 23

⁶ Burton, 1994 p. 210

⁷ Burton, 1994 p. 211

feminists began to gather into themselves accounts of middle-class women's agency in improving the bodies, souls, homes, characters and workplaces of others. Whether or not individual women social activists aligned themselves with what we would now understand to be feminism, the broad tenor of their involvement in the work of altruism, the recitation of 'women's achievements' and of 'women's work' for these helpless others, was part of the furniture of first-wave feminism. British feminist middle-class subjectivity came into being –in part at least – through a process of writing, speaking and acting for others.

Uncovering a history, disclosing a glorious past of long-dead sister feminists, second-wave feminist historians did not systematically question this mode of ventriloquising working-class women; the recurrent representation of the 'bitter cry' of the outcast group. And perhaps it will be asked: why should they have done so? After all, the condition of inhabitants in prisons, workhouses, city slums or sweatshops, was bad. Feminists called for an end to such social conditions, bringing the matters to public attention, whilst women social activists dedicated their lives to improving the existence of the poor. What could be wrong with this? I suppose this is the place to reiterate that this thesis has not been about the rights or wrongs of social action, or a critical assessment of 'women's achievements', but rather an investigation of the narrative acts (the production of histories and subjectivities) that underlay the formation of modern British feminism. I hope that the foregoing chapters have not given the impression of nasty ladies who clumped along like policemen without boots, repressing autonomous working-class culture and politics as mere automatons in the cause of bourgeois hegemony. The aim, at least, has been to question the effect of the relations of power inherent in social action in the reformation of middle-class female subjectivity: the use of the bodies, characters and

stories of the working-class poor in the production of new (middle-class) gender identities. The absolutely taken for granted system of class differences was the cultural material from which modern feminism made itself.

It is this very inevitability of class differences, the very fact that to talk about and identify nineteenth-century 'feminists' or 'philanthropists' (almost without exception) means a discussion of upper-middle class women, which has made those differences between women almost invisible in history. The particular historical narratives of women and social action produced by late twentieth-century feminism have conflated the production of a distinct feminist identity with identification between women. Such histories have naturalised the inequalities of power inherent in class structures, whilst putting 'women' as the subject of feminism outside this system of power as a transcendent identity with no responsibility for the making of class itself.

There are various reasons why feminists have not addressed the role of this representational relationship between 'women' in the formation of middle-class feminist identity at the turn of the century. Whilst in the case of Burton's analysis, Subaltern and post-colonial studies have fostered a rich variety of interdisciplinary research and provided various architectonic models for understanding imperialism, race and gender, research and theory around the subject of class has dwindled significantly in British academic culture in the last twenty years. As Beverly Skeggs puts it in the only significant work concerning class and gender identity in Britain produced in the last five years, 'Class doesn't sell' anymore.⁸ There is no broad desire to disclose, uncover, expose the workings of the hidden injuries of class at the level of language and representation, despite class being in so many ways the original concern of Cultural Studies, from which this very

⁸ Beverly Skeggs, *Formation of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable* (London: Sage, 1997) p. 7

methodology and the subdisciplines of gender and post-colonial studies themselves emerged.

Away from the trends of the academic marketplace there is another reason why the imperialist, racist rhetoric of nineteenth century feminism has received so much (much needed) attention in recent years and the discourses of class so little. For Burton's process of interrogation is a part of the systematic critique of the theory and practices of white Western feminism produced by Black and non-Western feminists in the last twenty years. Critics such as bell hooks have questioned the assumptions of inclusiveness and representation inherent in second-wave feminism, unravelling the very narrow location of its project in terms of race, geography, sexuality and – as a final mention in the usual litany – class.⁹ This fracturing of the identity of modern feminism, disturbing any sense of complacent cohesiveness, has led feminist scholars to look further back into the past and to question how deep racism and imperialism run in the Western women's movement.

But there has been no equivalent critique of modern feminism in terms of its class location. Though solitary voices are heard, there has been no ground swell – either in terms of political action or academic production – that has forced feminists to address the exclusions and symbolic violence of class. Perhaps this is because such counter criticism always needs, at some point early in its development, a moment of identification or even celebration, the expression of a common (marginalised) identity in opposition to the dominant paradigm. Yet as Skeggs has pointed out in her recent work, how can the identity 'working-class woman' ever be a point of celebration or of mass identification, when women's relationship to this class position has been (and is) one of dis-identification: a constant striving to not be that object of political concern and moral panic

⁹ bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (London: Pluto, 1982)

and become 'respectable'. Passing, improving, moving onwards and upwards has long characterised working-class women's remaking and re-presenting themselves out of the material conditions of their existence.¹⁰ Being 'working-class' for women (as opposed to men) has never presented a site of communal identity, or place of nostalgic return.¹¹ The myth is not one of origin, but of destination. And perhaps it is this very investment in the idea of mobility that has shaped how feminist history tells the story of class and has left feminist theory lacking an understanding of its own part in perpetuating discourses of class difference. In the moment of reclaiming duty and social action as part of feminist history, feminists identify (with) the social origin of modern feminism whilst repeating the process of dis-identification from working-class womanhood.

In so many ways working-class women are still marginal to the subject of feminism, especially as far as the academic discipline of women's studies is concerned. Class as an object of enquiry simply does not fit with the politics of identity and theories of power so central to feminist debates in the last twenty years. Class in its various aspects paradoxically appears both too permeable (one does not necessarily stay in the same objective class position over time) and too rooted in the material (how can the politics of discourse transform the lives of those struggling for subsistence?) to work within post-modernist formulations of identity and power. Of course throughout this thesis I have adopted such theories for an exploration of the relationship between class and gender, but here at the end it is time to suggest that this grafting of class onto gender is only a useful beginning. Feminist theory still needs to address the challenges that class differences pose to its intellectual paradigms and political history.

¹⁰ See Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman* pp. 9-14

¹¹ It is on these grounds that Pamela Fox has attempted to draw a model of political resistance from the idea of shame in working-class narratives. See, Pamela Fox, *Class Fictions: Shame and Resistance in the British Working-Class Novel, 1890-1945* (NC: Duke University Press, 1994).

Appendix

Biographical Index

Anderson, Adelaide (1863-1936):

Born in Australia, daughter of a ship-broker, and niece of Elizabeth Garret Anderson, Adelaide Anderson was educated at home by governesses, at school in France and Germany, Queen's College, Harley Street and Girton College, graduating in moral sciences in 1887. She then lectured on philosophy and economics for the Women's Co-operative Guild, was active in the women's suffrage movement and served as a clerk to the Royal Commission on Labour. Anderson was appointed factory inspector in 1894 and promoted to principal lady inspector on the retirement of May Tennant (q.v.) in 1897, a post Anderson held until the women's inspectorate was merged with the men's in 1921. After her retirement Anderson investigated child labour in China and Egypt under the auspices of the ILO. DBE 1921. See Anderson, 1922.

Asquith, Margot [Tennant] (1864-1945):

Daughter of a wealthy industrialist, raised much like Beatrice Webb (q.v.), in a variety of country homes and in London, Asquith went on to become a noted political hostess from the late 1880s onwards. After the death of her sister Laura [the first Mrs Alfred Lyttleton] in 1886, Asquith continued their shared habit of independent philanthropic work by running a lunchtime club for women factory workers in Whitechapel, work she sustained for the next eight years. Her close friendship with, and later marriage to the politician H.H. Asquith made her influence prized by the women factory inspectors. See Asquith, 1920.

Barnett, Henrietta [Rowland] (1851-1936):

After a year working with Octavia Hill (q.v.) in Marylebone she married the Rev. Samuel Barnett, then a curate in that parish, in 1873. Later that year the Barnetts moved to St Jude's Church, Whitechapel, the centre of their joint philanthropic efforts for the next thirty years. Barnett was nominated as a Poor Law Guardian in 1875 and was manager of the Forest Gate District School from 1875 to 1897. She co-founded the Children's Country Holiday Fund in 1884 and was honorary secretary of the Whitechapel branch of the Metropolitan Association for Befriending Young Servants. With her husband she was active in the development of Tonybee Hall and the ideals of the settlement movement and exerted a palpable influence over the philanthropic practices of other workers in East London, as can be seen in the correspondence from Ella Pycroft (q.v.) to Beatrice Webb (q.v.). Initially advocates of the C.O.S., the Barnetts distanced themselves from the organisation in the late 1880s over the issue of old age pensions. In 1903 Henrietta Barnett formed the Hampstead Garden Suburb Trust, a project to which she devoted most of her energy to the end of her life. D.B.E 1924. See Henrietta Barnett, *Matters that Matter*, 1930.

Black, Clementina (1853-1922):

Daughter of David Black, solicitor, sister of Constance Garnett, Russianist and translator (q.v. Olive Garnett), Black was educated at home by her mother. After her mother's death, Black cared for her younger siblings, taught and wrote short stories.

She moved to London with her sisters in the 1880s, working in the British Museum and lecturing on 18th century literature and befriending prominent socialists, among them Eleanor Marx. Black became secretary of the WPPL in 1886, resigning in 1889 to form the WTUA, which in turn morphed into the investigative Women's Industrial Council in 1894. Black's campaigns against sweated labour and for a minimum wage continued for the next twenty years. Black was a leading non-militant suffragist and one of the vice-presidents of the London Society for Women's Suffrage from 1906. See DNB Missing Persons.

Bosanquet, Helen [Dendy] (1860-1925):

Daughter of a non-conformist minister turned Manchester businessman, Bosanquet was educated at home by a governess, then attended Newnham College, Cambridge, where she specialised in political economy and was one of the first two women to gain first-class honours in moral sciences in 1889. In that year she moved to London to become the District Secretary of Shoreditch C.O.S., meeting the philosopher Bernard Bosanquet through the London Ethical Society, and marrying him in 1895. She went on to produce a great volume of work concerning social economics, social work and social theory and was appointed to the Royal Commission on the Poor Law, 1905.

Collet, Clara E. (1860-1948):

Daughter of Dobson Collet, economist, literary editor and correspondent of Karl Marx (whose daughter Eleanor was a childhood friend of Clara's). Brought up in a strongly Unitarian family, Collet attended North London Collegiate School. After some years as a High School teacher in Leicestershire, she returned to London in the mid-1880s to complete an MA in Political Economy at UCL, thus becoming the first woman to hold such a qualification. During this period she worked for the C.O.S. in Soho, contributed a chapter on women's work to the first volume of Charles Booth's *Life and Labour* and was jointly responsible with Margaret Sewell for the social work training courses provided at the Women's University Settlement in London. She was appointed an Assistant Commissioner for the Royal Commission on Labour, 1891-1894 and subsequently as a labour correspondent at the Board of Trade. Collet became a regular correspondent of George Gissing's from 1893 and on the latter's death in 1903, Collet acted as his executrix. See Jane Miller, 1990, pp. 70-108; Rosemary O'Day, 1995, pp. 164-180.

Deane, Lucy Anne Evelyn (c. 1860-1951):

The daughter of Colonel Deane, killed at the Battle of Majuba Hill in the Transvaal War and the Hon. Mrs Deane, daughter of the 2nd Earl Falmouth. During the early 1890s Deane and her younger sister Hyacinth lived in West London and undertook training in various areas of social reform work, living off an allowance of £60 p.a. each provided by the dowager Lady Howard de Walden (nee Lucy Cavendish Bentick). Violet Markham notes that Deane trained with Miss de Pledge – the reformer of Poor Law Infirmary nursing – at the Chelsea Infirmary and worked with the philanthropic Clewer sisters in Westminster, where she gained 'much insight into the grievances of working girls'. After gaining certificates in Anatomy, Physiology, Hygiene and Nursing from the National Health Society, Deane then took up paid employment as a lecturer for that philanthropic organisation in early 1893. The NHS, est. 1873, gave free lectures on issues of health and hygiene to the poor throughout the country, often subsidised by the local authorities. With her fellow NHS colleague,

Rose Squire (q.v.), Lucy Deane was appointed as a Woman Inspector of Workshops by the Kensington Vestry in October, 1893. Six months later she joined May Abraham [q.v. Tennant], Mary Paterson and Adelaide Anderson (q.v.) in the women's branch of the Home Office Factory Department, where she remained for the next 14 years. Deane also served on the Boer War Concentration Camps Commission of Enquiry 1900-1901, headed by Millicent Garret Fawcett, as Chief Woman Organiser of Women Outdoor Staff for the National Health Insurance Commission, 1911, the Royal Commission on the Civil Service, 1913, and the Committee of Inquiry into the WAAC, 1914-1918. M. Major Granville Streatfield, 1911; awarded CBE 1918. Additional contact with Emilia Dilke (q.v.), Gertrude Tuckwell (q.v.), Isabella Ford (q.v.), Beatrice Webb (q.v.), Ella Pycroft (q.v.). See TS biography by Mrs Carruthers [Violet Markham] in the Tuckwell Collection, TUC Archives; McFeely, 1988, pp. 29-48.

Dilke, Lady Emilia [Strong; Pattison] (1840-1904):

Daughter of an Indian army Major turned bank manager, Henry Strong, Dilke was educated by a governess in Oxford. Whilst in Oxford she began to study art, and after a recommendation from John Ruskin, went on to study at South Kensington Art School. In 1861 she married Mark Pattison, Rector of Lincoln College Oxford and continued to produce works of art history. The 21 year age difference between Dilke and her first husband, added to George Eliot's visits to Lincoln College have encouraged numerous biographers and critics to assert that Mrs Mark Pattison was the model for Dorothea in *Middlemarch* (1871). She joined the WPPL in 1876, speaking at its annual meetings and founding an Oxford branch and also joining the Women's Suffrage Society in Oxford during this period. After the death of Mark Pattison in 1884, she announced her engagement to Sir Charles Dilke in the midst of the divorce scandal. In 1887 she assumed the presidency of the WPPL changing its name to the WTUL and attended the TUC annually from 1889-1904 as its representative. Her patronage and political influence was essential in the careers of many women labour activists at the turn of the century, including her niece, Gertrude Tuckwell (q.v.), May Tennant (q.v.), Lucy Deane (q.v.) and Margaret Bondfield.

Ford, Isabella (1855-1924):

Born into a family of wealthy Quakers in Leeds, Ford was related to Edward Pease and the Gurney/Fox/Fry network of philanthropic Friends in Bristol. In 1885 Ford assisted Emma Paterson of the WPPL in establishing a machinists society for tailoresses in Leeds. In 1889 she helped to organise the Leeds tailoresses union and took part in strike action there. Ford was a founding member of the Leeds Society for Women's Suffrage in 1890 and joined the Independent Labour Party three years later. During the 1890s she formed a close working relationship with Gertrude Tuckwell (q.v.) and the women factory inspectors. In 1898 she was nominated to the executive committee of the WTUL and from 1903 to 1907 she served on the National Administrative Committee of the ILP. On resigning this former post she joined the executive committee of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies and held this role until 1915. In the post-war period she was active in the international peace movement. See Hannam, 1989.

Furse, Katherine [Symonds] (1875-1952):

Daughter of John Addington Symonds, writer and collaborator with (and an anonymous case study for) Havelock Ellis' *Sexual Inversion*. Furse spent most of her youth in Davos, Switzerland, where her uncle, T.H. Green, the Sidgwicks, Benjamin Jowett and Margot Asquith (q.v.), among others, were regular visitors. With minimal formal education, Furse started sick nursing in Davos and after the death of her father, working for the C.O.S. in Whitechapel in the late 1890s, inspired by the 'family tradition of social service'. She had resolved to train as a nurse when she married the artist C.W. Furse in 1900, who died four years later. Furse enrolled in the first Red Cross Voluntary Aid Detachment in 1909, and in 1914, headed the first V.A.D. unit sent to France. In 1917 she resigned from the V.A.D. department to become director of the W.R.N.S. In her post war career she was active in the Girl Guide Movement. D.B.E. 1917. See Furse, 1940.

Garnett, Olive (1871-1958):

Daughter of Richard Garnett, keeper of printed books at the British Museum, Olive Garnett was educated at Queen's College, Harley Street. Her energy in the early 1890s was mainly devoted to the anarchist cause, producing the journal the *Torch* with the Rossetti children and befriending the Russian exile Sergey Stepniak. She also attempted to write several novels, along with her more successful childhood friends, Beatrice Harraden and Ford Madox Hueffer [Ford]. However Garnett also cast around for some practical social purpose, working at the Highbury C.O.S. for a period during 1893 and registering for a course on sick nursing. Clementina Black (q.v.) was a frequent visitor to Garnett's home during the 1890s, with her sister Constance, Garnett's sister-in-law. In 1896 Garnett left London to work in Russia. See Johnson ed., 1989; 1993.

Harkness, Margaret (1854- 19??):

Novelist and socialist. Daughter of a country vicar, Harkness moved to London to train as a nurse in the late 1870s. By 1880 she had abandoned such work for a career in journalism, covering mainly social issues regarding the employment of women. She was a resident of Katherine Buildings for three months during 1886, whilst undertaking research for her first novel *A City Girl* (1887). A distant cousin and childhood friend of Beatrice Webb (q.v.), the Potter family supported Harkness financially for a considerable period of time. Harkness was a friend of Eleanor Marx, Olive Schreiner and Tom Mann and was probably responsible for introducing Webb to all three during the mid 1880s. Harkness is now probably best remembered as the recipient of a letter from Fredrick Engels, in which he spelt out the true mission of socialist art in response to a request he review her novel. See Nord, 1990; Kapp, 1976; Ledger, 1997.

Hill, Octavia (1838 - 1912):

Daughter of James Hill, corn merchant and banker and Caroline (nee Southwood Smith) daughter of the sanitary reformer. Educated at home and with a view to earning a living, due to financial losses by her father, Hill took up work in London in the early 1850s teaching ragged-school children to make toys under the auspices of the Christian Socialist Ladies Guild. It was at this time that she befriended John Ruskin and Frederick Denison Maurice. She became a secretary to the women's classes at the Working Men's College, and began visiting the poor in Marylebone, around the school run by herself and her sisters. In 1864 Ruskin underwrote her first experiment

in housing management in Marylebone. Hill spent the rest of her life promoting her schemes of rent-collecting, raising the poor 'without almsgiving' and training other women in this work (including Kate Potter, sister of Beatrice Webb (q.v.), and Henrietta Barnett (q.v.)). Hill was also a founding member of the London C.O.S., maintaining that organisation's perspective on the Royal Commission on the Poor Law, 1905-1909. See Moberly Bell, 1928; Lewis, 1991

Hunt, Agnes (1866-1948) and Florence Marianne (?1836-1902):

Daughter of minor landed gentry Florence Marianne Hunt spent the early part of her married life raising her eleven children at Boreatton Park, Baschurch. In 1882 Hunt sold up the family home a few years after being widowed and decided to move her family to Australia 'after hearing a lecture in the village hall' about the opportunities offered in the Antipodes. She returned to live in Girdlers Road, West Kensington in 1886 after the failure of her plan to buy an island and raise angora goats. Once settled in Kensington she played a prominent role in the Hammersmith and Fulham District C.O.S., representing the Committee on the central council of the C.O.S. for many years. She also was a Poor Law Guardian in Hammersmith from 1889-1895. Her youngest daughter, Agnes suffered from osteomyelitis which left her significantly disabled, but Hunt refused to consider her an invalid and encouraged her into an independent and active life. Agnes eventually qualified as a nurse after serving as a lady-probationer despite many breakdowns in health. After working as a District Nurse, Agnes Hunt went on to establish the Baschurch home for cripples (later the Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt Orthopaedic Hospital) in 1900 and the Derwent Cripples' Training College in 1927. See Hunt, 1938.

Martindale, Hilda (1875-1952):

Daughter of William Martindale, City merchant and Lousia (nee Spicer) of an eminent family of Liberal-Nonconformist manufacturers. Her father died before she was born and Martindale spent much of her youth with her maternal relatives. Her mother was active in the Liberal women's suffrage movement and other social and political causes, befriending the young Margaret Bondfield in her efforts to aid women shop workers. Martindale was educated at Brighton High School, Royal Holloway and Bedford College, where she studied hygiene and sanitary science – a semi-official training course for women sanitary inspectors towards the turn of the century. On the advice of Graham Wallas she spent some time visiting Poor Law Schools and inspecting boarding-out schemes for Dr Barnardo's. The driving force behind both her daughters' careers, Louisa Martindale travelled the world with them in 1900, finishing their education with a series of visits designed to refine their experience in the fields of medicine and social reform which she had chosen for them. Hilda Martindale was offered a temporary post as women inspector of factories by Adelaide Anderson (q.v.) in 1901, after the latter attended Martindale's lecture on her experiences abroad. Posted to Ireland 1905-1912, Deputy Principal Lady Inspector, 1918, Deputy Chief Inspector, 1925, Director of women's establishments, Treasury, 1935. C.B.E 1935. See Martindale, 1944.

Nevinson, Margaret [Wynn] (1859-19??):

Daughter of an Oxford Movement Rector, Nevinson was the first wife of the journalist H.W. Nevinson. Upon their marriage they moved to Wentworth Dwellings, workman's flats in Whitechapel, 'strongly urged there by the Rev. Samuel Barnett and

his wife' (q.v.). Nevinson ran a girls club in association with Toynbee Hall and rent collected at Katherine Buildings with Beatrice Webb (q.v.), Ella Pycroft (q.v.) and Margaret Harkness (q.v.), taking a paid post there as assistant agent in 1888 after the birth of her son. She later became a treasurer of the Women's Social and Political Union and claimed the training in accountancy she gained from rent collecting was invaluable in this respect. Nevinson also served as a School Manager, Poor Law Guardian for Kilburn and in 1919 became a J.P. Somewhere along the way she found time to write the suffragette play 'In the Workhouse', staged in May 1911. See Stowell, 1992; Nevinson, 1926.

Pethick-Lawrence, Emmeline (1867-1954):

Took up social work with the Methodist West London Mission, headed by Mrs Hugh Price Hughes in the early 1890s, after being greatly influenced by the evangelical Christian Socialist, Mark Guy Pearse. In 1895 she broke away with her friend Mary Neal to form the explicitly socialist Esperance Working-Girls' Club, founding a co-operative dressmaking business in 1897. Through contact with the Mansfield House Settlement she met her husband, Frederick Lawrence whom she married in 1901. After meeting the Pankhursts in 1906, the Pethick-Lawrences became key figures in the WSPU and the militant suffragette action of the early twentieth century. The Pethick-Lawrences broke away from the WSPU in 1912 to form the non-violent Women's Freedom League. See Pethick-Lawrence, 1938.

Pycroft, Ella (c. 1856-1926):

Daughter of a country doctor, Pycroft moved to London from Devon in 1883, initially working in a girls club in Soho. In 1884 she took up the salaried position of Agent for the East End Dwellings Company with responsibility for Katherine Buildings, a post she held until 1890. After breaking off her engagement with the Toynbee Hall resident, Maurice Eden Paul, she left London to attend the Cambridge Teacher Training College, study at Naas and Paris and act as Superintendent and Organising Secretary at the Gloucester School of Cookery – a pet project of Beatrice Webb's sister, Mary Playne. In 1893 she became Chief Organiser of Domestic Economy Subjects for the Technical Education Board of the London County Council, retiring in 1904. Pycroft met Lucy and Hyacinth Deane (q.v.) in her latter capacity, whilst Hyacinth was seeking work as a cookery instructor. See Bateson, 1895, O'Day.

Squire, Rose (1861-19??):

Daughter of a Harley Street doctor, Squire was educated at Queen's College Harley Street and with the National Health Society, where she completed special courses on Infirmary Nursing with Miss de Pledge of Chelsea. Squire was appointed as a woman inspector of workshops by the Kensington Vestry with Lucy Deane (q.v.) in 1893, where Squire took a special interest in the campaign to bring laundries under state regulation with the aid of Emilia Dilke and Gertrude Tuckwell. Squire was nominated to the Factory Inspectorate in 1894. During the late 1890s Squire was cultivated as a contact by Beatrice Webb (q.v.) and the latter 'stood sponsor' for Squire in her appointment as a special investigator to the Royal Commission on the Poor Law in 1906. After returning to the factory inspectorate in 1908, Squire was posted to Manchester as Senior Lady Inspector for the Northern Division, returning to London in 1912 upon her promotion to Deputy Principal Lady Inspector. In 1915 she worked once again with May Tennant (q.v.) as part of the Health of Munitions Workers

Committee, moving in 1918 to become Director of Women's Welfare at the Ministry of Munitions where she was responsible for the training of women factory welfare officers. See Squire, 1927.

Tennant [Abraham], May (1869-1946):

Born in Dublin, the daughter of George Whitely Abraham, commissioner of lunacy, and educated at home by him, she left Ireland after his death to seek her livelihood in London at the age of eighteen. Introduced to Lady Dilke (q.v.) by Eliza Orme (according to Gertrude Tuckwell), Abraham went on to act as Dilke's secretary and as treasurer of the Women's Trade Union League. Abraham acted as lady assistant commissioner on the Royal Commission on Labour, 1891-1894 and was appointed the first superintending woman inspector of factories in 1893. She married H.J. Tennant a liberal M.P. (brother of Margot Asquith q.v.) in 1896 and retired from the factory inspectorate a few months before the birth of her first child. She remained involved with labour legislation despite her retirement from public office, chairing the Industrial Law Committee and returned to the public service during the war, acting as chief advisor on women's welfare at the Ministry of Munitions. In the post war period she turned her attention to maternal mortality and other health issues.

Tuckwell, Gertrude (1861-1951):

Daughter of the Rev. William Tuckwell 'the radical parson' and schoolmaster. She was educated at home and greatly influenced by visits to her maternal aunt Mrs Mark Pattison (later Lady Emilia Dilke (q.v.)) at Lincoln College, Oxford. 'Imbued with the idea of public service' and encouraged by Edith Simcox, Tuckwell trained as an elementary school teacher in Liverpool in which capacity she worked for the London School Board from 1885-1893. On May Abraham's (q.v. Tennant) appointment as Principal Lady Inspector of factories, Tuckwell took over from her as secretary to Emilia Dilke, becoming in time Honorary Secretary and then President of the Women's Trades Union League. Abraham and Tuckwell shared a flat in Chelsea which served as an informal basis of support for the women inspectors, just as the Dilke's home provided essential political contacts for women reformers and labour activists. Tuckwell was central to the establishment of the Industrial Law Committee and the promoting the exhibition of sweated industries in 1906. In the post-war period Tuckwell served on a number of government advisory committees in the field of women's work, chaired the National Association of Probation Officers and was one of the first women magistrates. See TS autobiography 'Reminiscences' Tuckwell Collection TUC Archives.

Ward, Mary Augusta [Mrs Humphry] (1851-1920):

Daughter of Thomas Arnold, granddaughter of Dr Arnold of Rugby and a niece of Matthew Arnold. Educated at boarding school, Ward returned to her family in Oxford in 1867 and played a leading part in the movement for women's higher education at the university after her marriage to Thomas Humphry Ward, fellow of Brasenose College. Her best-known novel *Robert Elsmere* (1888) sold 70,500 copies in its first three editions after the publication of an extensive review by Gladstone in the *Nineteenth Century*. It was only after the publication of this work of fiction dealing with social service in London's East End that Ward became involved in practical philanthropic efforts, establishing the Passmore Edwards Settlement in 1897. A leading anti-suffrage campaigner, Ward persuaded Beatrice Webb (q.v.) to undertake

the 'false step' of signing the women's anti suffrage petition in 1889. Along with Tuckwell (q.v.) and Webb, Ward was one of the first seven women to be appointed magistrates in the post-war period.

Webb, Beatrice [Potter] (1858-1943):

Daughter of Richard Potter, timber and transport magnate and Lawrencina Potter. Webb worked for the C.O.S. in Soho during 1883 whilst in London for the season. Her sister Kate worked as a rent collector in London periodically from 1875, when she had trained and lived with Octavia Hill (q.v.) for two years. Upon Kate's marriage to Leonard Courtney in 1883, Webb took up rent collecting work on a voluntary basis in Katherine Buildings, Whitechapel with Ella Pycroft (q.v.) and Margaret Nevinson (q.v.). Viewing such work as part of her apprenticeship as a social investigator, Webb collected and tabulated information about the tenants of the buildings. Webb continued to develop her investigative work throughout the 1880s, writing a number of articles on women and labour and contributing a chapter on Dock Labour for the first volume of her cousin Charles Booth's work *Life and Labour in London*. After her marriage to Sidney in 1892, Webb embarked on the joint research and campaigning projects which lasted their lifetimes, most notably in this context, regarding the extension of the Factory Acts in the mid 1890s and the reform of the Poor Law, as a member of the Royal Commission on the Poor Law, 1905-1909. See Webb, 1926; Nord, 1985.

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