

# **“Thank God for the Public Press, Which Sheds Its Strong White Light on All the Dark Corners of the Earth!”: Ada Nield Chew’s Journey From Factory Girl To Author-Activist**

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay recovers an often overlooked episode in women’s labor history. Its focus on author-activist Ada Nield Chew reconstructs her journey towards literary professionalization and her evolving relation to literature and the radical press. The essay features extended close literary analysis of Nield’s “Crewe Factory Girl” letters for the first time. Examining their significance as historical records contextualizes Nield’s early writings and their intersections with the literary marketplace, socialism, and feminism in 1890s England.

**KEYWORDS:** Literature; History; Suffrage; Feminism; Ada Nield Chew>

LATE SUMMER 1894, in the thriving railway town of Crewe, twenty-four year old tailoress Ada Nield was sensationally dismissed from Compton Brothers clothing factory. She was charged with inciting female co-workers to unite and to demand what she called a “living wage” as opposed to their current “lingering, dying wage.”<sup>1</sup> Nield termed herself an “average ordinary hand,” earning five to eight shillings a week for ten to fifteen hours work a day. The supply of paid work was often irregular, and factory favoritism meant that some

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<sup>1</sup> Compton Brothers produced railway uniforms and army and police clothing.

women received larger shares of the better-paid jobs; that said, all tailoresses were paid less than tailors for similar tasks.

Throughout that summer, Nield's anonymous letters, signed "A Crewe Factory Girl," were featured in the Crewe *Chronicle* and reported nationally in the *Clarion*. This exposure garnered support from Crewe men's unions and the town's MP, as well as attracting the attention of Independent Labour Party organizers, who offered to supply her with work should her identity be revealed and her position lost.<sup>2</sup> Daughter Doris Nield Chew's account of her mother's dismissal from the factory speaks of her courage at that moment:

Addressed by one of the employers who had come specially from London, she had been provoked into revealing her identity. In front of several hundred fellow workers, some of whom were hostile, some neutral, and none of whom dared to support her openly, she defended her case, speaking in public for the first time in her life and in a situation from which practiced debaters would shrink . . . it was obvious that the main front of her offending was that she had "blazoned" her grievances in the public press. (16)

By the end of the year, the ex-factory girl had been elected a Poor Law Guardian, was working with the local Trades Council, and had addressed a union meeting in Crewe, sharing a platform with Eleanor Marx. Nield had propelled herself out of the factory and into radical political circles within the space of one summer.<sup>3</sup>

This essay recuperates both an overlooked episode in women's labor history and Ada Nield Chew's activism through writing. It aims to reconstruct her journey towards literary professionalization and her evolving relation to literature and the radical press. Further, the discussion offers close literary analysis of Nield's "Crewe Factory Girl" letters for the first time, including newly discovered letters not included in *Ada Nield Chew: The Life and Writings of a Working Woman*. An examination of their significance as historical records, contextualized through Nield's biographical details, offers new details from the archive of her early career. This portrait of her earliest writing reveals significant intersections with the literary marketplace, socialism and feminism of 1890s England.

<sup>2</sup> Male supporters included Walter Maclaren, Liberal MP for Crewe, who wrote to the *Chronicle* on 1 Sept. 1894 identifying the factory as Compton Brothers; he also investigated government contracts held by Comptons. On 22 Sept., Nield told the *Chronicle* about an "interview" that had taken place between Compton Bros. and Will Thorne, General Secretary of National Union of Gasworkers and General Labourers (including women tailors).

<sup>3</sup> In the 1890s, 900 women were elected as poor law guardians to "join a service previously run by 22,000 men" (Parker 28). Nield was one of the country's first working-class women guardians (Liddington 137). Her address before the National Union of Gasworkers and General Labourers, greeted with "hearty applause" was reported in Crewe *Chronicle* (25 Aug. 1894).

## “Crewe Factory Girl”

Nield's first letter to the *Crewe Chronicle* and, apparently, her first appearance in print, is titled 'A Living Wage for Factory Girls at Crewe' (5 May 1894).<sup>4</sup> It speaks of the urgency of her cause:

One cannot open a newspaper without seeing what all sorts and conditions of men are constantly agitating for and slowly but surely obtaining . . . only very vague mention is ever made of the under-paid, over-worked “Factory Girl” . . . I have just read the report of the Royal Commission on Labour. Very good; but while Royal Commissions are enquiring and reporting and making suggestions, some of the workers are being hurried to their graves.

Tailoresses working in factories existed in far smaller numbers than the textile-working women and girls in cotton towns; tailoring factories were sporadically dispersed across the country and less likely to be at the forefront of union activism.<sup>5</sup> As Liddington and Norris argue, “the experience of working in factories, offices or schools lacked the political impact of mill jobs” (111). Therefore, the tailoring factory girl was sparsely represented in the press. Nield's leadership of a shop floor rebellion and mobilization of an entire town's labor-force was all the more outstanding for its originality.

The first two letters printed in the *Chronicle* are typical of 1890s protest writing, being designed to rattle employers; to enlighten, instruct, and shame well-to-do readers; and to embolden and rally her peers. In Nield's words, she used them to “describe fully and explicitly the exact work done by us,” promising to “speak only of what I know to be actual fact” (19 May 1894). She complained, “[t]o take what may be considered a good week's wage the work has to be so close and unremitting that we cannot be said to ‘live’ . . . we merely exist” (5 May). She called for immediate practical changes to the distribution of work and revision of the poorly paid piece-work system.<sup>6</sup> After the practical, factual, and compelling descrying of the girls' “slavery” and “exhaustion” in the first two letters, Nield's tone changes: she comes to enjoy her opportunity to write expressively, demonstrating flair and imagination.

As a result, on 9 June 1894, Nield's role at the newspaper changed when her “letter” shifted from the correspondence column into its own column, directly addressing her readers rather than the Editor. In it, she offered an introduction to the characteristics of tailoresses. Here, she serves as guide-narrator, reminiscent of Dickens's implicating and accusatory mode of social-commentary in fiction:

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<sup>4</sup> The socialist *Chronicle* was sympathetic to workers like Nield. For example, in the same edition as Nield's first letter, there also appeared an original poem, entitled “The Living Wage” by a working man from Chester.

<sup>5</sup> The census of 1891 counts 89,244 women employed as tailors in England and Wales, compared to 332,784 working in cotton manufacture: significant numbers still, but dwarfed by the women cotton workers (Purvis 27).

<sup>6</sup> In later letters, she objected to the factory docking female employees' pay for hot water, whether or not they made use of it for tea; they were also charged exorbitant prices for thread, which they had no choice but to buy from their employer.

I make my bow to the readers of the *Chronicle*, and beg to reintroduce myself . . . I ask them now . . . to come with me (in imagination) through the factory doors . . . I, the factory girl, throw wide these doors. I invite the public, one and all, to come with me as my visitors. I will give them . . . a thorough good look into everything, from the factory girl's point of view. Thank God for the public press, which sheds its strong white light on all the dark corners of the earth! ("Life in a Crewe Factory" 9 June 1894, P2, columns 6–7)

On 23 June, Nield appeared twice in the *Chronicle*: once in her regular letter to the Editor in the correspondence columns (p. 5—in which she responds to correspondents' commentary), and then again in her own column which begins, "[t]o-day, something special happens. I not only plod to the factory myself, but I take a whole army of *Chronicle* readers with me" ("Life" 23 June, P5, column 7). This, in effect, represents her first official newspaper article. Nield finally has the freedom of being granted extra column inches by her sympathetic Editor in response to public curiosity aroused by the Factory Girl. Of her "army," she asks "are you prepared, my reader, to come and work hard with us 9 hours in the factory, and then to come home with us and begin again, and sew till you can sew no longer, from sheer fatigue?" She instructs readers to "come with me now to this counter" (where factory girls wait for their work), explaining that they may wait for hours, only to receive no work at all:

I shall be obliged to ask you to jump—I am afraid you will have to jump, for it is a pretty high counter . . . We shall not be the only girls there! Don't feel ashamed of sitting perched up in a row like rabbits at the market. That feeling will wear off with a little practice. We shall not have much room to move our limbs as our comrades are wedging us in on each side and in front, and I dare say we shall get a little cramped, but we shall be able to watch what is going on, nevertheless. (23 June)

She asks if readers have brought a "novelette" to read while waiting, as the factory "favourites" who do not have to queue for work, leave with the best-paid sewing. Such passages demonstrate Nield's developing literary style, as she asks readers not only to "hear" and "see" life in the factory but also to "feel." She combines imagined physical sensation (she jumps, sits, waits, and becomes cramped) with emotion (she must mortify her shame at being commodified, exploited, and neglected); by extension, the sympathetic reader is asked to participate in these feelings as well. This sketch of factory life ends with a flourish: "[t]he doors will be open next week, and the factory girl in attendance, if you will be so good as to come again." These first insightful and entertaining vignettes into the sensations of factory life are writings distinct from her more purposeful, entreating protest letters, and they mark a significant moment in Nield's journey towards professional authorship. Taken together, these divergent styles—didactic letters and imaginative sketches—convey a diversifying author enjoying the freedom of her press platform and her burgeoning literary voice.

In the same issue (23 June 1894), Nield provided her usual "letter to the Editor" as a separate piece. She responds to an anonymous *Chronicle* correspondent who termed him-

self “one competent to advise” (16 June). This correspondent was most likely one of the Compton Brothers managers, intent on discrediting Nield’s story and hoping to frighten and silence her. The writer warned against the formation of a Factory Girl Union, arguing that women were not skilled or experienced enough to understand “conditions of the trade,” and blaming the public for its unwillingness to pay higher prices for clothing:

A look at clothiers’ windows will soon convince sensible people at least that there is not much margin of profit in which commercial cannibals can fatten, when men’s suits are sold at 25s and youths’ trousers at 3s, 10d . . . As soon as the market is in favour of higher value for clothing, manufacturers will rejoice, and workers will have no need to combine to form unions to raise wages. (June 16)

As a result, Nield’s subsequent *Chronicle* letters are more subdued; this public warning from within the factory refocused her efforts on expressing pay grievances and raising support for the cause. Recognizing the newspaper’s potential to become a space for two-way communication, Nield invited readers to write to the *Chronicle* with “any question you would like to ask” (30 June). Another important moment in her developing literary authority came when she was required to defend herself and her writing against accusations of having had “help” from a male co-author and against insinuations that the author could not be a woman at all. She reiterated this defence at least three times in the *Chronicle*, in part motivated by fear of her factory-mates being implicated and by a justifiable pride in her writing. On 25 August, she told readers about a male employee of Compton’s known to “hold advanced views on things in general” who had been summarily discharged: “I myself have heard him accused of assisting me to produce those letters. I have repeatedly and emphatically denied this, both publicly and privately, but seemingly without the slightest effect in convincing those in authority that what I say is true.”<sup>7</sup> Knowing that she must be running out of time in her current factory position, she wrote her most affecting letter, a call to union and action:

We are now in an entirely disunited, disorganised state, and are consequently entirely at the mercy of the employers; and while we remain so, we shall, in my opinion, never get the slightest alleviation of this grievance. I propose then, as an ultimate, and not necessarily remote, means of remedy, that we, that is the factory girls of Crewe, and any other class of female workers who may like to join us, first organise ourselves into one strong united body, and further, that we affiliate with some already existing union of workers, and thus, when the time is ripe, shall we not only speak with an effective voice ourselves, but shall also have the help of other workers in the redress of our grievances, and on our part shall in turn be able to help others.

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<sup>7</sup> She reiterated her authorship on 4 August and 6 October, having also been accused of writing the letters in collaboration with the *Chronicle* Editor.

Under the heading “Life in a Crewe Factory: A Storm” (28 July 1894), Nield described the result of this call to action: management decreed that the tearoom would be shut down and no late arrivals admitted after locking factory doors in the morning. This served to punish the author of the letters and to encourage other girls to root out and alienate her. But Nield’s influence was already too strong to contain. She had inspired “a few brave spirits” in the factory to “interview” management about the issue of favoritism. Nield, who was present at this delegation, comments, “what these plucky girls said would have warmed the hearts of *Chronicle* readers” The girls managed to get assurances about changes in how work was distributed. Emboldened by this support from fellow factory girls, Nield invited *Chronicle* readers to a union meeting that week. In the weeks that followed, she was shamed in an hour long “cross-examination” in front of the factory’s 400–500 hands when the owner came up from London to see her sacked, but not before thirteen of her supporters had also lost their jobs (recorded in “Life in a Crewe Factory: A Hurricane.” 4 August 1894).

The strength of public support for Nield and evidence of the inspiration and encouragement she gave to others like her is revealed in letters of support featured in the *Chronicle*. For example, the issue dated 26 May 1894 contains a letter to the Editor signed by ‘A Youth of 17 Years’ who complained of the “Long Hours of Chester Shop Assistants” and called for unionization and a strike (5). In the same edition, Owen Goulding of the ILP wrote in support of Nield; he quoted a Crewe dressmaker, who called for an end to unpaid two-year apprenticeships: “I wish there would be a public meeting for factory girls and dress makers . . . Perhaps it may stir up some kind friend to look into our living wage if I send this letter to you” (6). A 2 June letter from Reverend H. Bodell-Smith of Crewe commends Nield’s “courage and ability in advocating so excellently the destruction of the evils from which she and her class suffer” (2). He is convinced that the evils of “commercial cannibalism” exist in “every factory in Crewe,” and that “the milliners, dressmakers, and shop girls suffer equally with [the tailoresses].”

On 15 September 1894, Nield, the ex-factory girl, was finally able to communicate directly with her supporters in a letter signed in her own name, under the heading, “Organisation Among Women Workers” It is her most forthright communication yet: she uses her *Chronicle* platform to inform supporters of tailoresses’ conditions elsewhere in the country and to disseminate information from pamphlets she had recently read:

Sir,—I have just read with much interest extracts from two pamphlets which have reference to the above subject, and as it should necessarily be a subject of much importance to the inhabitants of Crewe where hundreds of women are working under conditions known to be bad, and who are also entirely unorganised. I have thought that if you sir, would permit me, it might be useful to try to interest your readers, and my late fellow-workers especially, in the contents of these pamphlets. (p. 2, col. 4–5)

One is titled “The Factory Work of Women in the Midlands” by Amy Hurlston, and the other “The Bitter Cry of the Voteless Toilers” by W. E Wilkins. Nield summarizes their arguments and relates them specifically to the Crewe factory women and girls. She is partic-

ularly attracted to Hurlston's insistence that only working-class activists can truly motivate workers: "[a] few public spirited women of the middle-classes have endeavoured, but without success to stir up some higher ideal of their rights and duties among these unfortunate factory slaves." Nield outlines Hurlston's arguments about the damage caused by sweated labor of women to the next generation:

these women, who are the present or future mothers of the working community, are, as an inevitable result of the degrading conditions of their live[s], incapable of producing and moulding sons "physically, intellectually, and morally into habits of thrift, and independence of thought and action, with a fair knowledge of what is due to themselves"

Getting closer to relating the broader consequences of exploitation of women workers to the population of Crewe, she describes the second pamphlet by Wilkins:

Says the author: "What of the thousands of seamstresses who are unmarried, those who stand alone, who cannot by earning an honest living keep body and soul together? How do they subsist? Working from dawn till eve in filth and unutterable squalor for a wage which does not suffice to buy the barest necessities of life, hundreds—nay, thousands—of young women eke out their wretched earnings by means of the streets" The contemplation of such things makes one's heart ache!

Nield adds, "the conditions of female labour in Crewe are certainly not so bad as those of the Midlands and the East End, but conditions are bad, and the state of women workers would be much worse but that many of them live at home, and are partly maintained by fathers and brothers"

Therefore, Nield issues a warning that circumstances could get worse for Crewe women and girls as factory exploitation hits everyone harder, including the health and moral fiber of future generations. She uses this space to urge the political organization of women workers, arguing that they cannot do it without support from the men in their families. She then outlines the benefits of joining a union, informing readers about "out of work" union pay and explaining that, had the fired Compton Brothers girls been in the Union of Gas Workers and General Labourers earlier, they would by now qualify for such compensation: "they would have been in receipt of 5s a week out of work benefit. This for a contribution of a penny a week" However, she demonstrates the strength of community support for the girls and the comradeship of membership by advertising a union-sponsored concert to benefit them. She ends this, her first known publication signed with her own name, thus: "I hope you will pardon my trespassing so far on your valuable space, Sir. I can only offer as an excuse my earnest desire to see my late fellow-workers protected and helped, and my hope that through the medium of the 'Chronicle'—which I know they all read—may encourage them to make use of their opportunities." This letter, previously overlooked by critics and

historians, demonstrated Nield's continued reliance on the *Chronicle* as a sympathetic space and a public platform through which to educate and communicate with her supporters.

Two weeks later, the *Chronicle* carried a report about that benefit concert, stating that "600 persons attended" the event at the Free Church Assembly Hall in Crewe on the previous Wednesday, and that the Reverend Bodell Smith introduced Nield from the stage to much applause. She addressed the crowd, thanking her supporters and summarizing her complaints against Compton Brothers, this time in person, to cries of "hear, hear" from the crowd. The reporter's paraphrase of Nield's speech offers insight into the paper's relationship with her, reiterating that she was the originator and sole author of the tales from the Factory: "She wrote the whole of the letters and described everything as she felt it. She had a very warm regard for the 'Chronicle'; and would always look upon it with affection (Cheers). It had represented her so faithfully (Renewed cheers)" This indicates the relationship of camaraderie and kindness that existed between the newspaper and Nield and its reading community of unionists, ILP supporters and factory hands gathered to support the factory girls and to applaud the *Chronicle's* role in the protest. On 13 October 1894, Nield appeared in the *Chronicle* again, writing to thank those who attended and raised £18 6s 5d for Nield and the other women.

The *Chronicle* again demonstrated its support for Nield with a report (29 Sept. 1894) entitled "Labour Meeting at Crewe: Messers Compton and the Factory Girls." Here, union representatives presented the factory managers' perspective, following a meeting aimed at reinstating the fired women workers (p. 5, col. 2). The *Chronicle* asserts that management could not hold the women responsible for Nield's writing—"[i]t was admitted that not two in every hundred factory girls could have written such intelligent letters"—and yet Compton's had not, as yet, recalled the dismissed workers. As an immediate result of her campaign and growing public support for Nield, "the firm capitulated: the women who had been sacked"—excepting Nield, of course—"were eventually reinstated, the cost of materials they had to buy was reduced, and the fining system was overhauled. The wage rates, of course, were not increased" (Liddington and Norris 110).

Nield continued to agitate and organize in Crewe, to the extent that, in 1900, the tailoresses were incorporated into the new "Female Section" of The Tailors' Society; in 1905, eleven years after her first letter was published, she formed a branch of the Amalgamated Society of Tailors in Crewe, newly incorporating over forty tailoresses.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, her *Chronicle* campaign did effect real change in women's trade unionism and Crewe factory life.

By the end of summer 1894, Nield was a celebrity in Crewe, her name known in Labour activist circles across the country, thanks to *Clarion* coverage of her campaign. *Chronicle* readers were clearly anxious to know what happened to Nield next. According to two front page advertisements, she was by November 1894 the manager of a confectioners on the High Street in Crewe. Her name appears in the *Chronicle* for the last time that year in a report detailing the polling results for the Parish District and workhouse Guardians Elections. She was one of thirty-five candidates standing for Nantwich Board of Guardians.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Liddington and Norris (274n24 & 135) and Doris Nield Chew (32).



one of sixteen who won seats. She stood as a Labour candidate and had the second highest majority of the election with 250 votes.

## The Factory Girls and Reading Culture

The letter campaign of 1894 was just the beginning of a life spent agitating for representation and equality for poor women. Nield's career as an author began by writing anonymous letters to the provincial press; but throughout her activist career, barely a month went by when she did not appear in such political papers as *Common Cause*, *Englishwoman*, *The Freewoman*, *Labour Leader*, and *Clarion*. She subsequently published short stories that fictionalized the daily toil of poor Northern women. In 1912, Nield reflected on her literary maturation: "One feels your process of growth as you write; and one feels oneself growing as one reads! And growth is no less the joy than the law of life" ("Let the Women").

This discussion now turns to documenting Nield's changing relationship to literature from her infancy through the 1890s. Such a focus offers insight into both family and factory reading cultures, as do analyses of her changing relation to reading and writing as a result of her professionalization in the radical press. Details of Nield's early life are scant; historians lament that she destroyed her autobiography (Liddington and Norris 17). The eldest girl of thirteen siblings born to a North Staffordshire farming family, she received no formal education beyond age eleven; and, while not poor enough to undertake factory work as a child, she did begin shop work at age seventeen.

Literature played a large part in family life. Nield's mother was particularly devoted to reading popular penny weeklies, to the extent that the younger siblings were named after characters in *Family Herald* stories (Justinian Moore, Hilbert Edwin, Hugo Francis, William Victor).<sup>9</sup> Sally Mitchell's work on *The Family Herald* encourages scholars to consider the impact of reading penny weeklies in families like the Nields, members of a newly literate class with time for leisure reading. This inevitably changed the culture of their domestic space:

If one were neither so poor that children had to be sent to the factory at seven nor so well-to-do that nurserymaids, governesses and boarding schools were inevitable, the women in the home took on responsibility for supervising a much longer childhood. The woman who had a little leisure for reading was, to an extent, socialized through what she read; the woman isolated at home with her children socialized in turn the next generation. (Mitchell 4)

Penny magazines were read by people whose aspirations, expectations, and opportunities were changing. As a working-class woman from a town that embraced unionism and labor party organizing, Nield was exposed to literary influences beyond popular culture.

<sup>9</sup> *The Family Herald: A Domestic Magazine of Useful Information and Amusement for the Million* [sic] (1843–1940), a weekly story paper launched by George Biggs in 1842, and re-established in May 1843 by James Elishama Smith, with mechanized printing. Initially a penny weekly, it later sold at 2d (see Cox and Mowatt).

Nield was a keen reader of the Labour party weekly *Clarion*, which was “eagerly awaited each week in thousands of working class homes” (Liddington and Norris 122). After her writing for the *Chronicle*, Nield’s next public venture was an 1896 tour in the “Clarion Van”, a women-only ILP campaign vehicle (a converted soup van); she sent reports from each stopping point to the *Clarion* for publication:

For younger women, in their twenties at the turn of the century, the *Clarion*, along with the adult education movement, the Labour Churches, books borrowed from the Co-op Libraries, had a tremendous impact . . . it opened a whole new world of possibilities that had been closed to women’s [like Ada Nield’s] mother’s generation. (Liddington and Norris 124)<sup>10</sup>

The *Chronicle*, like many town papers of the era, brought national issues and trends to regional readers and carried general reports on progressive women’s issues of the day. Appearing alongside Nield’s letters in May 1894, in its “Ladies’ Corner” feature, were articles reprinted from national papers on Rational Dress, the Club Woman in London, and the “New Woman” in the fiction of Sarah Grand and Ouida. In June, it covered women and temperance, bicycling, and smoking. Clearly, the geographically or financially isolated factory girls of Crewe were not out of touch with new constructions of feminine identity coming out of metropolitan literary centers and radical politics.

Details about Nield’s other reading habits are thin. Doris Nield Chew’s biography notes that her mother was devoted to Austen for her “irony” and “sense of humour,” and that she was a devotee of H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett, who she kept “always at hand” (30, 36). From as early as 1896, Nield associated with Charlotte Perkins Gilman and knew her writing. She was among those millions who had access to a range of literature, including popular fiction, local and national papers, and popular penny weeklies, with their mix of social aspiration, etiquette advice, romance and diversion. Nield also had access to a new inexpensive, radical reformist press and to contemporary social and political pamphlets. Doris Nield Chew notes that her mother allowed her to read “whatever I liked without censoring,” and that—even while campaigning with the ILE, WTUL or NUWSS—she remained an avid reader: “[t]hese years must have been extremely busy ones for my mother . . . But she always found time to read, and the three of us spent hours round the fire, each absorbed in a book” (36). There is a marked contrast here between the generations: whereas Nield’s mother shared penny weekly stories with her family, her own family (husband George Chew and daughter Doris) prized individual reading. However, in her first letter to the *Chronicle*, among the many grievances about pay and conditions, Nield foregrounded the complaint that working women’s need to subsist restricts time for reading:

We eat, we sleep, we work, endlessly, ceaselessly work, from Monday morning till Saturday night, without remission. Cultivation of the mind? How is it possible? Reading? Those of us who are determined to live like human beings and require

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<sup>10</sup> The Labour Church (founded in Manchester, 1891) combined Christian and Socialist ideas. The Crewe church helped form the local branch of the ILP in 1893, but whether Nield attended is unknown.

food for the mind as well as body are obliged to take time which is necessary for sleep to gratify this desire. (5 May 1894)

In a subsequent letter, Nield added “literature” along with clothing and boots, and paying doctor’s bills and rent, as essential expenditures for factory girls (19 May).

Nield’s earlier reference to “novelettes”—feminised and diminutive, short and trivial—alludes to popular fiction of the time. On 9 June 1894 she wrote in the *Chronicle*:

I shall have to admit we are shallow, too. And we always shall be shallow as long as we are voracious readers of “penny dreadfuls” I can hardly contain myself when speaking of those awful “novelettes”—I see such fearful effects of their baneful existence—in place of reading of a broader, more substantial kind; and in our hours of leisure parade the streets in gangs (please excuse the words, I cannot just think of a more polite kind), talking empty twaddle with the equally silly of the opposite sex, instead of taking a lively interest in the doings of our fellow-men and women in the great world around us, and ourselves taking a part, however humble, therein.

Nield understood that, despite their love of reading, devouring “novelettes” would not help factory girls to recognize or articulate their situation. D. J. Collier, in his 1918 work *The Girl in Industry*, noted factory girls’ disinterest in self-improvement and, like Nield, blamed it on exhaustion rather than lack of ambition or intellect:

The heaviest indictment against the 10-hour day comes from the Trade Union representatives. Many of these declare that the girls are utterly worn out at the end of the day and are generally incapable of any serious work, which accounts for the small proportion of girls who attend Workers’ Educational Association and other evening classes . . . very few girls at the clothing factories have much energy for Continuation and Workers’ Educational Classes after their full day’s work. (10–11)

Nield’s focus on working women’s reading appetites in her early protest letters attempts to construct the factory girl in more expansive ways for the public consciousness. This insistence upon the necessity of leisure reading adds another perspective to late-nineteenth-century discourse about the role of art and literature in raising moral and spiritual health among the poor, as advocated by John Ruskin and other middle-class commentators. Nield’s early letters speak of working girls’ interests, curiosity, and “longings,” as well as their everyday needs.<sup>11</sup> Chew constructs the Factory-Girl not just as poor and hungry, but as eager to preserve her dignity, her leisure, and her means of self-improvement. Eileen Janes Yeo writes that Nield was “at variance with other activists who unquestioningly thought they could speak on behalf of working-class women and were constantly dismayed

<sup>11</sup> Nield notes: “even the factory girl has the audacity to long [for] sometimes—but has quite as often to do without . . . [a] holiday away from the scope of her daily drudging” (19 May 1894).

by working-class indifference or rejection of their help” (188). Nield’s factory girl letters indicate that it was essential for everyone, including middle-class readers and activists, “to understand and appreciate that the differences and commonalities between women had to be recognized if women’s lives were to improve.” As the factory girl letters progressed, she adopted narrative techniques that drew increasingly upon fiction, knowing she had to attract readers to their cause, demonstrate her eloquence, and explain what was happening inside the factories, while offering an authentic representation of women of her own class. Her early protest letters expanded the national understanding of working women and their shop floor activism. Here, Doris Nield Chew summarizes her mother’s career:

In everything she said and did it was the working woman she was concerned for, and as a working woman she spoke. . . . If ever there was a woman who combined a fierce sense of injustice with compassion for others and determination to “stand on her own two feet” it was my mother Ada Nield Chew. (67)

## **Life after Crewe**

By 1896, Nield was enjoying the independence of a wayfaring life on the road in the Clarion Van, canvassing support for the party. This suited her itinerant temperament; she recoiled at the thought of a traditional life of domesticity. After marrying prominent ILP organiser George Chew in 1897 and giving birth to their only child Doris a year later, Nield (now Nield Chew) refused to be bound by convention. She frequently took Doris out of school to join her on her travels for the Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL) and the ILF. Nield was also a driving force in the WTUL’s campaign to improve working conditions at the Staffordshire Potteries, particularly for victims of industrial accidents and lead poisoning.

Nield found, when attempting to spread the ILP and WTUL word to working- and poor-women, that she also had to utilize the traditional oral culture of women’s communication. She found that she could not effectively reach and politicize the women she needed to influence through the press alone. On the Clarion Van tour, Nield spoke to an estimated 6000 people per week. So, in women’s political activism in the 1890s to 1900s, what Sally Mitchell called the “oral traditions of face-to-face culture” were not necessarily supplanted by print, especially in the hard-to-reach rural working communities of northern England, where Nield focused her campaigning (2–4). Nield honed her polemical literary skills for public oratory during this, her mid-career.

Doris Nield Chew recounts witnessing her mother take to the hustings at a series of by-elections between 1912–14, when ILP candidates were standing in England and Scotland. All of this effort went into election campaigns in which Nield, as a woman, had no right to vote; but she understood that the vote was coming and, when it did, an established party would be needed to represent working-class women like herself. The significance of her contributions to these formative days of Labour is often overlooked. She lived long enough

to see the Labour party, for which she had worked so hard, win a landslide majority government in 1945, just months before her death.

Like many women involved in the trade union and labor movements, Nield gravitated towards suffragism. Today, her very visible involvement with the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (as NUWSS organizer for the Rossendale Valley constituency) and her role in convincing the society to back the labour party may be less widely discussed than her spat in the *Clarion* with Christabel Pankhurst of Women's Social and Political Union. She accused Pankhurst of prioritizing enfranchisement for "the entire class of wealthy women" while "the great body of working women, married or single would be voteless still" (16 December 1904). Nield's belief in peaceful protest, as well as her working class background, positioned her apart from the middle-class and militant Pankhursts.

As a practical pacifist, Nield refused to participate in war work of any kind. She opposed the NUWSS's suspension of the fight for women's vote in order to concentrate on supporting the war effort; instead, she joined the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. In October 1914, she led a deputation of the National Federation of Women Workers and The Women's Labour League to the Rochdale Health Committee, convincing local authorities to establish health and maternity centers for working women left to support families on the Home Front. A year later, concerned for the sufferings produced by wartime unemployment, she established a relief committee that doled out food from vans to Rochdale mothers and their infants. Between the wars, Nield continued campaigning; she was also a successful businesswoman, running a series of rag, textile, and health food stalls and shops across northern England. Her multifaceted career as a "factory girl," protest writer, Trade Unionist, *Clarion* Vanner, and campaigner for social justice, as recorded by Doris Nield Chew, was adapted by Alan Plater for Granada TV as *The Clarion Van* (1983). The approaching centenary of the 1918 *Representation of the People Act* provides a timely opportunity to recover and celebrate the life and writings of radical women like Ada Nield Chew, who are vital to our understanding of political Herstories and the foundations of modern political feminism.

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