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JAMES J. SMYTH

The Power of Pathos

James Burn Russell's Life in One Room and the creation of council housing

ABSTRACT

James Burn Russell's pamphlet, *Life in One Room* (1888), is almost certainly the best known and, as is argued here, the most influential published work in the history of social reform in modern Scotland. Regardless of Russell's own intentions and political beliefs *Life in One Room* became the default source for those who sought to promote housing for the working class and council housing in particular. It is remarkable just how often, and at what length, it was quoted in writings about and referenced in debates on housing before the First World War, during the War and after. This article seeks to identify the influence and attraction of Russell's pamphlet with particular reference to the author's opposition to Social Darwinism and to its literary qualities. Russell's style was quintessentially Victorian but this is not to dismiss it as hopelessly sentimental. Informed by recent approaches to the history of Victorian culture and literature we can see how Russell, equally at home in the arts as in the sciences, consciously used sentimentalism or pathos to get his message across to the wider public.

We ought not to preen and expand *our* virtues to the sun in our self-contained houses, putting them in proud contrast with the vices of those who live in the one-roomed house, without asking ourselves how far both the virtue and the vice are

native to the physical circumstances in which we find them. (J.B. Russell, *Life One Room* [1888])

On the evening of 27 February 1888 the Park Church Literary Institute in the west end of Glasgow held one of its regular meetings, the invited speaker being the city's medical officer of health (MOH), Dr James Burn Russell. The title of his talk, according to the report in the following day's *Glasgow Herald* was 'The City in Which We Live'.¹ That account faithfully reported the main subjects covered by Russell: Glasgow's high population density, the prevalence of small (one- and two-roomed) houses, the subsequent overcrowding and high infant mortality in those houses, and his call for 'general helpfulness' or 'practical Christianity' in aiding the lives of the inhabitants of such houses. It is unlikely, however, that the reporter, the audience or even the speaker himself were aware of just what the long-term impact of that talk would be. Quickly published as 'Life in One Room', first as an article in the *Sanitary Journal* and then later the same year as a separate pamphlet, Russell's piece would prove to have a major influence on the debates on housing in Scotland and have a huge impact on policy, even beyond his death in 1904, and particularly the decision to build council houses after World War One. As such it stands as perhaps the single most influential published work in the history of social reform in modern Scotland.²

I would like to thank my colleague in English Studies at the University of Stirling, Adrian Hunter, and the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions.

¹ *Glasgow Herald*, 28 Feb. 1888.

² *Sanitary Journal*, Mar. 1888; *Life in One Room: or Some serious considerations for the citizens of Glasgow* (Glasgow, 1888). It was subsequently reproduced in the memorial volume of Russell's writings, A.K. Chalmers (ed.), *Public Health Administration in Glasgow* (Glasgow, 1905); more recently it has been included as an appendix in Edna Robertson, *Glasgow's Doctor: James Burn Russell 1837-1904* (East Linton, 1998), 198–217. Given the extensive quotations from the piece in this article it will not be footnoted hereafter, though Russell's other articles and contributions are. All emphases are Russell's.

Such a claim is not an attempt to place Russell as a unique figure who stood head and shoulders above his contemporaries. Indeed Russell can be seen as one of a type. As his biographer has commented, ‘The late-Victorian period produced other Scottish medical officers of eminence and formidable ability—Henry Littlejohn of Edinburgh, Matthew Hay of Aberdeen, and John McVail of Stirlingshire.’³ More names could be added to that list and it would need to be expanded also to include similar figures south of the border such as John Simon of London, William Henry Duncan of Liverpool and James Niven of Manchester.⁴ All of the medical officers knew each other or at the very least were aware of each other’s work and writings which impacted upon and influenced their own. For instance Russell would have been very well aware of Littlejohn’s *Report on the Sanitary Condition of Edinburgh* published in 1865, the same year in which the young Dr Russell caught typhus through his work in the city poorhouse and was appointed superintendent of Glasgow’s fever hospital.⁵ Described accurately as ‘monumental’, Littlejohn’s report set the standard for future studies of health and mortality through ‘the development of a new social geography of the city, by defining areas according to their topography, drainage arrangements, social composition and economic activities’.⁶ Littlejohn’s work had an immediate impact in Edinburgh, changing the very terms of the debate on public health and would influence fellow sanitarians elsewhere including Russell. Both men, like others in the field, wrote copious reports and memoranda and gave expert testimony to numerous parliamentary

³ Robertson, *Glasgow’s Doctor*, 3; M.A. Crowther, ‘Poverty, Health and Welfare’, in W. H. Fraser & R. J. Morris (eds), *People and Society in Scotland Vol. II, 1830-1914* (Edinburgh, 1990), 284-5.

⁴ Interestingly Niven was Scottish and Duncan, whose parents were Scottish, studied at Edinburgh. See Joan Mottram, ‘Niven, James (1851–1925)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2010) [<http://www.oxforddnb.com.ezproxy.stir.ac.uk/view/article/57128>; accessed 31 May 2016]; and A. R. Allan, ‘Duncan, William Henry (1805–1863)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2010) [<http://www.oxforddnb.com.ezproxy.stir.ac.uk/view/article/37375>; accessed 31 May 2016].

⁵ Robertson, *Glasgow’s Doctor*, 52-4.

⁶ Paul Laxton and Richard Rodger, *Insanitary City: Henry Littlejohn and the condition of Edinburgh* (Lancaster, 2013), 1-5.

and other commissions and inquiries, yet out of all of this public health proselytising it was Russell's relatively slim *Life in One Room* that would be most quoted and referenced over decades, and have the most direct political impact.

The work of Russell is a crucial source for the social history of Glasgow and Scotland in the late Victorian period. References to and quotations from his many publications pepper both general histories and specialist studies of housing and public health. Perhaps this has been inevitable given that Russell was Glasgow's MOH for such a long period and Glasgow has always attracted attention as the major urban and industrial centre of Scotland and the most slum-ridden city of Britain. The argument presented here, however, is that there is more to Russell's prominence than simple chance, that there is something about his literary abilities, most perfectly expressed in *Life in One Room*, that demands attention and needs explanation. It is not enough just to quote the good doctor.

A starting point is to recognise Russell as a product of the 'democratic intellect' of Scotland and one who believed that the 'old Scottish tradition' of breadth of knowledge was superior to the narrower specialisms of English practice.⁷ Prior to starting his medical degree in 1858, Russell enrolled at Glasgow University for an MA in 1854 aged seventeen. In the first four years of his studies he took a wide variety of courses on philosophy, the classics, natural philosophy, mathematics, and so on. While his contemporaries believed that a bright future would be his, they were not certain in what field that might be. His close friend James Bryce (the future academic and Liberal politician) extolled Russell's literary abilities and wrote, 'His friends often wished in later years that circumstances had permitted him to cultivate this gift.'⁸ The prizes won

⁷ See chapter six of Robertson, *Glasgow's Doctor*, 'A Democratic Intellect', 42-7.

⁸ Quoted in Chalmers, *Public Health*, xvi.

by Russell as a student were equally divided between science and literature. Even after deciding to focus on medicine he continued his writing on arts and culture, with a particular interest in ‘reconstructing social conditions from the literary survivals of a period’.⁹ While Bryce’s comments reflect an at least partial regret that Russell did not pursue a literary career, the fact is that he did, only it was in the field of sanitation and public health rather than in criticism or translation. Between 1864 and 1898 Russell, while carrying out his official duties in Glasgow, published eighty papers on sanitary and public health matters.¹⁰

The *British Medical Journal*’s obituary of Russell stated that, ‘It may be said that continued literary activity was a feature of his life’, pointing out that he had revived the *Glasgow Medical Journal* in 1868 and acted as its editor for the next four years.¹¹

Russell never stopped writing. If he was to have an influence beyond the immediate and ephemeral impact of his official duties then he had to communicate with a wider audience, and the means of that communication was overwhelmingly by the written word. It just so happened that Russell, by inclination and training, was perfectly suited for the task. The same obituary referred to Russell’s ‘voluminous’ publications, ‘excellent literary style’ and the ‘pathos’ of *Life in One Room*.¹² As A.K. Chalmers, his successor as Glasgow’s MOH, wrote,

His greatest power ... lay in his pen. As a master of tense, lucid, convincing English I have never met anyone to excel him. And this, too, on subjects of an unattractive kind, such as slum dwellings, obstructive buildings, nuisance,

⁹ Chalmers, *Public Health*, xviii; Robertson, *Glasgow’s Doctor*, 46.

¹⁰ A full list is provided in Chalmers, *Public Health*, xxi–xxxii.

¹¹ *British Medical Journal*, 5 Nov. 1904, 1274.

¹² *Ibid.*

outbreak of epidemic disease, &c. His reports on these subjects cut clean as a surgical instrument, and always achieved their purpose.¹³

It is as a Victorian that we need to understand and appreciate Russell who was born in 1837, the year the young queen acceded to the throne. While the Victorians have so often been castigated or dismissed as sentimentalists, more recent work on the period has pointed out that Victorians themselves were among the most vocal critics of sentimentalism and in many respects prefigured the modernist critique. Furthermore, Victorian sentimentality co-existed with its apparent antithesis, the stiff upper lip mentality of repressed or denied emotions.¹⁴ The strength of sentimental writing is that it ‘invited readers to imagine experiences far removed from anything familiar by emphasizing facets of common humanity’. Stylistically, such an approach can be seen as a continuation of Dickens: ‘the emphasis on physiological sensation to advance a notion of common humanity, the reliance on the child as sentimental subject *par excellence*; and melodrama’.¹⁵ A reading of *Life in One Room*, and even just the extracts quoted here will show just how closely Russell’s masterwork adheres to this model. This is not to see Russell as some sort of hack following a well-worn script; his voice was much too individual and distinctive. It is, however, to recognise the permeability of scientific and literary writing in ‘an age when many novelists ... drew on reports produced by investigators whose authors, for their part, often deployed novelistic conventions in presenting their own “facts”’.¹⁶

¹³ Chalmers, *Public Health*, xxiv.

¹⁴ Carolyn Burdett, ‘Introduction’, special edition on ‘Sentimentalities’, *Journal of Victorian Culture* 16 (2011) 187-94.

¹⁵ Julie-Marie Strange, ‘Tramp: sentiment and the homeless man in the late-Victorian and Edwardian city’, *Journal of Victorian Culture* 16 (2011) 243.

¹⁶ Seth Koven, *Slumming: sexual and social politics in Victorian London* (Princeton and Oxford, 2004), 97-8.

Health and Housing in Glasgow

The rapid expansion of Glasgow's population in the early nineteenth century placed a strain on the city's housing stock and basic amenities from which, it could be argued, Glasgow never fully recovered.¹⁷ That the combination of insanitary conditions and overcrowding was fatal to thousands was made clear as early as 1818 by Dr Robert Graham, regius professor of botany at the University, in his report on the typhus ('fever') epidemic. That year and that particular text was usually regarded by sanitarians as the starting point of at least the awareness of the problem, what Russell termed 'a period of awakening'. Most of these early social statisticians, whose outspokenness Russell approved of, were medical men such as Graham, Cowan, Arnott, and Perry. Others, however, including city magistrates like Henry Paul, and even Captain Miller, the chief constable, made their contribution also, and all published before Chadwick's Report of 1843 in which Glasgow was infamously described as exhibiting the worst housing conditions in the whole kingdom.¹⁸ Recognition of the problem, however, did not lead to definite action, particularly over housing: a night asylum for the homeless was opened in 1838, and a model lodging association established in 1847 but that was about it.¹⁹

This period can be described as one dominated by a Malthusian pessimism leavened by **christian** evangelicalism. Even though that divine Malthusian, Thomas Chalmers, was to be defeated over poor law reform, and his nemesis was another

¹⁷ A study of poverty in the late twentieth century organised by parliamentary constituencies saw Glasgow secure six out of the ten poorest localities. See Mary Shaw et al, *The Widening Gap: health inequalities and policy in Britain* (Bristol, 1999).

¹⁸ Chalmers, *Public Health*, 5-15; Michael Flinn (ed.), *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain by Edwin Chadwick 1842* (Edinburgh, 1965), 10.

¹⁹ John Goodwin, *History of the Glasgow Night Asylum for the Houseless* (Glasgow, 1889); Stuart Laidlaw, *Glasgow Common Lodging Houses and the People Living in them* (Glasgow, 1956), 22.

medical man, William Pulteney Alison, it is striking how little changed in Scotland, even after the act of 1845.²⁰ Glasgow's efforts to do something about housing only really started in the 1860s, at the same time as the sanitary movement became officially recognised. A series of parliamentary bills permitted a sanitary committee to be established in 1862 and a (part-time) MOH appointed in 1863, Dr William T. Gairdner. The mid- and late 1860s witnessed a resurgence of typhus and the 'pygmy staff' soon became a permanent sanitary department, with a full-time MOH, a sanitary inspector, and attendant staff members. Of crucial importance was the passing, in 1866, of the act establishing the city improvement trust, an 'epoch-making event', according to Russell.²¹

The purpose of the improvement trust was to clear the worst slums of the teeming old town and replace them with better, more sanitary flats, and wider streets, a plan which was very much influenced by the modern Paris of Hausmann.²² It did have some successes, but the intention to encourage private builders to move into the cleared area and construct housing for the working class came to halt with a downturn in the building trade and the collapse of the City of Glasgow Bank in 1878. Most of the inhabitants displaced through demolition were not re-housed, and the Trust became an

²⁰ Olive Checkland, 'Chalmers and William Pulteney Alison: a conflict of views on Scottish social policy', in A.C. Cheyne (ed.), *The Practical and the Pious: essays on Thomas Chalmers, 1780-1847* (Edinburgh, 1985). For the continuing influence of Chalmers see J.J. Smyth, 'Thomas Chalmers, the "Godly Commonwealth" and contemporary welfare reform in Britain and the USA', *Historical Journal*, 57 (2014) 845-68.

²¹ Chalmers, *Public Health*, 20-6; Irene Maver, *Glasgow* (Edinburgh, 2000), 171-2. For the workings and wider significance of the trust, see C. M. Allan, 'The genesis of British urban development with special reference to Glasgow', *Economic History Review*, new series, 18 (1965) 598-613.

²² Maver, *Glasgow*, 172-4. A delegation of Glasgow Councillors visited Paris in 1866 and rhapsodised about how Haussman's 'stupendous changes' had 'made modern Paris probably the most magnificent city, as to external appearance, either of the ancient or modern world'. They commented favourably also on the absence of 'those loathsome types of utterly degenerate human nature that abound to such an appalling extent in our own closes and wynds'. Glasgow City Archives [GCA], DTC 14/2/2 (Municipal Reports, 1846-1866): 'Notes of Personal Observations and Inquiries, in June 1866, on the City Improvements of Paris, etc.'

unwilling and unwitting slum landlord.²³ While the intended scheme did not solve Glasgow's slum problem, its historical significance lies in it being 'the first British attempt to tackle the problems of slums and archaic layout on the sort of scale required', problems that were beyond the market, charity or public health regulations.²⁴ The actual operations of the Trust need not detain us here but of particular interest are the values which underpinned its creation. The preamble to the Act read: 'Whereas various portions of the City of Glasgow are so built, and the buildings thereon are so densely inhabited as to be highly injurious to the *moral* and physical welfare of the inhabitants ...'.²⁵

Morality and Regulation

By the 1860s and 1870s there was a general recognition that poor housing—insanitary and overcrowded—had a direct link to health and mortality. Alongside this a sanitary force, frustrated at apparently ignorant tenants and recalcitrant landlords, had been created to regulate and enforce minimum conditions. This can be said to have existed in cities throughout the United Kingdom and beyond, but in Glasgow regulation took on a particularly authoritarian and intrusive nature. While the rights of private property over and above the well-being of the community began to be identified as at least part of the problem, when it came to regulation it was much easier to police the lives of the poor.

Glasgow's most infamous technique, introduced in 1863, was the ticketing of houses and the night inspections of these houses. Houses of three rooms and fewer and of under 2000 cubic feet were measured and the numbers of inhabitants fixed according to the total air space; three hundred cubic feet was allowed for each adult and half that for a child under the age of eight, though this was subsequently extended in 1890 to four

²³ John Butt, 'Working class housing in Glasgow', in S. D. Chapman (ed.), *The History of Working Class Housing* (Newton Abbott, 1971), 55-92.

²⁴ Allan, 'British urban redevelopment', 613.

²⁵ Quoted in Chalmers, *Public Health*, 26, emphasis added.

hundred cubic feet per adult and two hundred cubic feet per child under ten.²⁶ The ‘ticket’, in effect a metal plaque, which stated the air space and number of persons allowed, was fixed to the door. Originally police officers, but then from 1870 sanitary inspectors, had the job of making unannounced visits, exclusively between the hours of 11.30 p.m. and 5 a.m. For many Glaswegians the night inspections of the ‘sanitary’ must have been a common occurrence; over fifty thousand such ‘visits’ could be paid in a single year. Alongside this intrusion were the day-time visitations of the lady sanitary inspectors, the number of whom could be even higher. And we need also to include the inspection of lodging houses, of ‘houses-let-in lodgings’ and ‘farmed-out houses’.²⁷ For breaking the regulations, tenants could be reported to a magistrate and fined. Lodging-house keepers had many more regulations to meet, but the main thrust of this strategy of inspection was aimed at preventing overcrowding in family homes as a means of combatting the spread of epidemic disease. In his defence of ‘ticketing’ Russell wrote, ‘We regard the exercise of this right of supervision as our main protection against typhus.’²⁸ This explains the hostility felt by the sanitarians towards lodgers and the habit of keeping lodgers.

In essence, the problem, as perceived by those in authority, was the bad habits of the tenants themselves. The census of Scotland in 1871 gave specific attention to the enumeration of lodgers, an interest provoked by concerns over mortality rates and the perceived relationship with housing. The registrar general blamed the working class for this, because of their tendency to take in lodgers:

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 160.

²⁷ For an illustration of the extent of such inspections see GCA, DTC. 7.23, ‘33rd Annual Report of the Operations of the Sanitary Department of the City of Glasgow’, which records 52,729 night inspections, 76,960 female visitations, and 8,629 inspections and re-inspections of houses-let-in lodgings and farmed-out houses. See also Parliamentary Papers [PP], 1884-5, XXI (Cd 4409), *Royal Commission for Inquiring into the Housing of the Working Classes Second Report (Scotland)* evidence of Russell, 49-50.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 92.

They will not spend on House rental anything like the proportion of their income which is spent by the middle and upper classes; and in order to spare money for dress and better food and drink, they never hesitate to crowd their families into as confined a space as possible, that they may sublet one or two rooms.²⁹

Moreover, he went on, since the 1840s and the national commissions into the sanitary conditions of the large towns, the housing for the working classes had improved substantially. Tenements had been built which were divided into flats of two, three or four apartments ‘with light closets’, which were designed to relieve overcrowding and ‘effecting a better separation of the sexes’. Yet, in the eyes of the registrar general, this only served to make matters worse as, in his view, it positively encouraged the tenants to take in lodgers. Given that as late as 1914 over 52% of Scotland’s housing stock was made up of houses of one or two rooms, and in Glasgow in 1911 over 66% of the population lived in either a one- or two-roomed house, it is not clear where all these large houses were located.³⁰

This concern with lodgers, and what it said about the habits and morality of the tenants, remained a concern of Russell’s. In an article of 1889, he wrote: ‘Glasgow is a City in which the keeping of lodgers may be said to be so prevalent as to be a serious social disease.’³¹ Writing fifteen years earlier, Russell had been even more condemnatory:

²⁹ Census of Scotland, 1871, *Report*, i. XXXVI.

³⁰ Richard Rodger, ‘Crisis and Confrontation in Scottish Housing 1880-1914’, in Richard Rodger (ed.), *Scottish Housing in the Twentieth Century* (Leicester, 1989) 29; Butt, ‘Working class housing’, 81.

³¹ Chalmers, *Public Health*, 245.

There can be nothing more abominable and vicious in its results than this habit of taking strangers, generally young unmarried men, into a house which is already straitened to accommodate its legitimate occupants.³²

For such violations Russell demanded ‘no mercy’ and argued that ‘only fines’, not ‘admonitions ... will make the violation of the law a losing game’. Where overcrowding was due to, ‘a family having grown beyond the dimensions of the house’, he was prepared to exercise a ‘paternal’ rather than ‘judicial authority’, but he was unsympathetic to adult children bringing their wife or husband into the home. Furthermore, where the family income could afford a larger house or, especially, where overcrowding was due to wasting money on drink, or where a house was dirty, Russell was determined that a penalty should be imposed:

By the introduction of such considerations as those, the legislation against overcrowding might be made a powerful lever for the elevation of the population to a higher ideal of the domestic life, and to habits of self-denial, for the purpose of maintaining that ideal.³³

Remarks such as these reveal a deeper seated view that the poor were the cause (though not the only one) of their own misfortune. Almost every description of housing and mortality included or ended on a generalised account of the lack of morals among the poor. In one study published in 1874, while identifying four causes: ‘Character and Occupation of the Population’, ‘Impurity of the Atmosphere’, ‘Density of Population

³² J. B. Russell, *On The Immediate Results of the Operations of the Glasgow Improvement Trust* (Glasgow, 1874), 18.

³³ *Ibid.*

and Overcrowding’, and ‘Infant Mortality’, the author over-writes nearly everything with observations on morality:

masses of labourers of the lowest class ... the retention of such habits and neglect of sanitary precautions ... overcrowding ... tends to encourage intemperance, immorality, and indigence ... neglect, or vice, or ignorance of the parents.³⁴

The explanation and preferred solution followed: ‘The greatest obstacle to progress is the vice, ignorance, or apathy of the class sought to be benefited, and as education spreads, their co-operation will be secured.’³⁵ What was wrong with the poor was that they were different from the middle class, and needed to be reformed—indeed, one might say, converted. At a meeting of the sanitary and social economy section of the Glasgow philosophical society in 1875 James Brown spoke on the topic, ‘The excessive mortality of Glasgow: its causes and remedies’, positing that, ‘until the people become religious, and convinced of their moral state, and the necessity of a new life, they would not get what they were aiming at—a healthy population.’³⁶

These were more than just individual opinions. The *Second Report on Scotland* of the 1885 royal commission on the housing of the working classes concluded that conditions in the large towns were bad, but not too bad, and that beyond ‘improved sanitary inspection’, nothing very much needed to be done:

³⁴ James Morrison, *Remarks on the High Rate of Mortality in Glasgow* (Glasgow, 1874), *passim*.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ GCA TD 400/1, ‘Minute Book of the Sanitary and Social Economy Section of the Glasgow Philosophical Society 1871-1914’.

the general feeling ... is, that the causes of existing misery are to be ascribed as much to the habits of the people as to certain outside influences which special stress was laid upon in the First Report.³⁷

In 1891 the Glasgow presbytery of the church of Scotland conducted its own commission into the housing of the poor. It stressed the christian duty of helping the poor and referred to 'social work', but even more stress was placed on reforming 'the moral and social habits of the poor'. It found overcrowding to be 'not only detrimental to health but to morals', although it emphasised that in 'regard to this matter landlords are absolutely blameless'.³⁸ Here are some of the sub-headings used in the Report when describing what to do with the residuum: 'The immoral and criminal crushed out'; 'Dissolute and profligate must be dealt with resolutely'; 'The race perpetuates itself'; 'Vagrancy shall be suppressed'; 'Repressive measures temporary'; 'Would be dispensed with in happier future'. How that 'happier future' was to be reached was not made clear and the only definite strategy for combating overcrowding was to employ the punishment of fines that Russell had been so keen to impose back in 1874. The commissioners were disappointed that tenants guilty of overcrowding did not feel threatened; they knew they were likely to get a reprimand only. While the commissioners understood the 'human motives' behind the unwillingness of magistrates to impose fines, they still wanted to see that 'the legal powers conferred on the Corporation will be exercised with a strong hand, and be more stringently enforced'.³⁹

The fact that these powers were not being enforced and that the civil, legal and sanitary authorities were clearly aware of and colluding in this should give us pause for

³⁷ [PP] 1884-85, *Report of Royal Commission on Housing*, 4.

³⁸ Presbytery of Glasgow, *Report of Commission on the Housing of the Poor in Relation to their Social Condition* (Glasgow, 1891) 15.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

thought. In his evidence to the royal commission in 1885, Russell was asked. ‘Do you find a general submission to your power of inspection and to your power of summoning or do you find resistance?’ He replied, ‘We find submission; the people are very passive in our hands.’ This certainty of Russell’s may have hidden ignorance on his part of the autonomy of those tenants. While claiming that the authorities always summoned the householder in cases of overcrowding, he admitted that a fine did not necessarily follow. A first offence was always dealt with leniently, and circumstances were taken into account by the magistrates. Russell argued that 80–90% of cases were first offences and this showed the system worked.⁴⁰ But it could have as easily been the case that this was because the inspectors were deliberately choosing not to prosecute certain cases and concentrating only on first offenders who they knew would be admonished. Furthermore, while resistance by tenants may not have been actively disruptive, it could be maintained by more discreet methods. At the presbytery commission in 1891 a night-time inspector was asked, ‘Do they [tenants] know you are coming?’ He replied, ‘They always appear to: one would think they had telephonic communication.’⁴¹

In the historiography of modern Scotland Russell, and those like him such as Littlejohn, are generally regarded as heroic figures doing their best for the common good, often putting their own health directly at risk in their work. Two of the most significant general histories of Scotland in recent times both describe Russell as ‘great’ and both quote the same passage from *Life in One Room*:

⁴⁰ PP, 1884-85, *Report of Royal Commission on Housing*, 50-51.

⁴¹ Presbytery of Glasgow, *Report*, 52; on the ‘working-class solidarity in this ticketed community’, see Butt, ‘Working class housing’, 69.

Their little bodies are laid on a table or on a dresser so as to be somewhat out of the way of their brothers and sisters, who play and sleep and eat in their ghastly company.⁴²

Interestingly in both cases the quotation is taken not directly from Russell but from Ferguson's 1958 work on Victorian and Edwardian welfare.⁴³ Russell appears similarly eulogised in the works of other historians, such as Checkland, for whom he was 'a great Medical Officer of Health', whose *Life in One Room* was 'Perhaps the most influential paper he ever gave'; and Rodger, who comments particularly on 'Russell's ability to ignite public opinion through lectures like 'Life in One Room' (1888) and 'Uninhabitable Houses' (1894)'.⁴⁴

It is the power of Russell's prose which makes him so eminently quotable and also which marks him out as an advocate for the poor; someone who wrote so movingly about the pressures of such circumscribed lives and especially the impact upon children has to be a sympathetic voice. For Checkland, the 'humanitarian' Russell 'stood in the great medical tradition of service to his community and especially service to the poor'.⁴⁵ An alternative view, however, is provided by Damer who takes a Foucauldian approach which emphasises the 'discourse of public health [as] a well-worked-out exercise of hegemonic power in the class struggle'. From this perspective the work of Russell and his colleagues in Glasgow's public health department 'was also all about trying to systematise the surveillance, control and moralisation of the burgeoning working class'.

⁴² Thomas Ferguson, *Scottish Social Welfare 1864-1914* (Edinburgh, 1958), 104.

⁴³ T.C. Smout, *A Century of the Scottish People 1830-1950* (London, 1986), 34; T.M. Devine, *The Scottish Nation 1700-2000* (London, 2000), 529.

⁴⁴ Olive Checkland, 'Local government and the health environment', in Olive Checkland and Margaret Lamb (eds), *Health Care as Social History: The Glasgow Case* (Aberdeen, 1982), 9-11; Rodger, 'Crisis and Confrontation', 26. See also Brenda White, 'James Burn Russell, MOH, Glasgow 1872-1898', *Proceedings of the Scottish Society of the History of Medicine* (1985-6) 1-9, and 'James Burn Russell', *Glasgow Medicine* (July-August 1986) 20-22.

⁴⁵ Checkland, 'Local government', 9.

Quoting Russell from an 1887 paper which emphasised morality, ‘discipline’, ‘thrift and self-restraint’, the saintly doctor is presented as ‘actually prefigure[ing] Foucault’ and possibly providing him with his template for power, surveillance and control.⁴⁶ Russell was a Liberal who became a Liberal Unionist because of Gladstone’s embrace of Home Rule for Ireland in 1886. He expressed anti-Catholic views and opposed the early socialist movement of the 1880s and 1890s. He did not agree with a state provided medical service and he retained enough of the spirit of Thomas Chalmers to believe that ‘charitable giving was better for the soul than paying taxes’.⁴⁷ Russell put his faith in sanitation which, in his view, would achieve what socialism aspired to only more quickly. His fellow MOH, John McVail of Stirling, wrote that Russell:

was well read in socialistic literature but all through its study his conviction remained unshaken that sanitation, thoroughly administered, can in the end achieve practically all that socialists aim at by other means.⁴⁸

This, it has to be said, represents a very limited view of what socialism was and what it sought to achieve. For Damer, Russell’s ‘highly elaborate discourse’ contains ‘an explicit attack on the socialism of Blatchford, Engels and Morris—and, by implication, contemporary Glaswegians who supported their ideas and their socialist practice’.⁴⁹ The presentation of Russell as a Foucauldian bogeyman committed to exercising power over the lower orders is, however, more complicated than such an approach might at first suggest.

⁴⁶ Sean Damer, “‘Engineers of the human machine’: The social practice of council housing management in Glasgow, 1895-1939”, *Urban Studies* 37 (2000) 2010-12.

⁴⁷ Robertson, *Glasgow’s Doctor*, 132-6; see also Smyth, ‘Thomas Chalmers’.

⁴⁸ *British Medical Journal*, 5 Nov. 1914, 1275.

⁴⁹ Damer, ‘Engineers of the human machine’, 2011.

While it is clear that Russell shared in the general attitude of moralising and authoritarianism detailed above, it is important to recognise the actual extent of this. Russell may have been no socialist but neither was he a social Darwinist. In a paper given as president of the philosophical society of Glasgow in 1887 Russell presented a critique of Herbert Spencer and flatly rejected the notions of ‘natural selection’, and ‘survival of the fittest’.⁵⁰ Many of Russell’s papers were originally given under the auspices of this society, and many were published in *The Sanitary Journal*. The sanitary and social economy section of the philosophical society had been established in 1864, just as Glasgow was beginning to amass its civic powers to tackle housing and health, and as the idea of the improvement trust was being established. Its members and office bearers included such as Russell, both his predecessor as MOH, Gairdner, and his successor, A.K. Chalmers, the chief sanitary inspector, Peter Fyfe, the senior poor law officer of Glasgow city parish, James R. Motion, and various engaged councillors and even the chief constable. This was a body which contained within itself a wide variety of views about the poor and what could and should be done about them. And just as a society could hold differing views so could an individual. Russell was sympathetic towards the plight of the poor, and did more than anyone to bring their conditions to public light, but he still believed—in the spirit of the Scottish poor law—that they should be encouraged to retain their independence.

At the same time, and unlike the Glasgow presbytery, Russell was highly critical of landlords, factors and other vested interests, something which Damer fails to acknowledge. In the same paper from which Damer quotes above, Russell wrote also:

⁵⁰ *The Sanitary Journal* (Dec. 1887) 289-305, reproduced in Chalmers, *Public Health*, 249-59. As White has commented, ‘In an age where many toyed with eugenics, Russell was a confirmed environmentalist.’ White, ‘James Burn Russell’, 22.

The argument that insanitary houses must be permitted because only such are within the means of occupants is like that for winking at the sale of adulterated and unwholesome food because the poor cannot afford better and will starve.

Both arguments are most frequently made by interested parties—the owners of insanitary houses and the sellers of bad food.⁵¹

As Russell was well aware, in Glasgow, as elsewhere in Scotland, property owners were organised, and powerful, able to galvanise ratepayer' opinion against municipal socialism, at times with dramatic effect.⁵² The two Glasgow provosts most identified with the improvement trust and housing were dramatically defeated at the polls: John Blackie in 1866 and Samuel Chisholm in 1902.⁵³ Russell fulminated against the complaints of landlords and factors when ordered to remove nuisances and carry out repairs, and their willingness to exploit legal loopholes to avoid their obligations. He pointed out the cost which slum tenements imposed upon the community since the sanitary rate was

spent upon the miserable properties which are the plague spots of the city, in a vain endeavour to keep down their disease and death producing effects, the owners meanwhile pocketing the rents ... and crying out 'confiscation' and 'compensation', the moment an attempt is made to reduce this expenditure by operating upon its causes.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Chalmers, *Public Health*, 188.

⁵² On landlord influence see David McCrone and Brian Elliot, *Property and Power in a City: The sociological significance of landlordism* (Basingstoke, 1989); J.J. Smyth and D.S. Robertson, 'Local elites and social control: building council houses in Stirling between the wars', *Urban History* 40:2 (2013) 336-54.

⁵³ Maver, *Glasgow*, 161, 172.

⁵⁴ *The Sanitary Journal*, Jan. 1880, 329-36.

Russell and Life in One Room: the power of pathos

Russell was moved to write this by a specific case involving the owners of a particular property, 6 Balmano St, which, in his diatribe, he pointed out had a higher death rate than the city average. This was one of Russell's main strengths, the collection of statistics at a micro as well as city level. Russell became particularly concerned about measuring health and mortality by the size of house. He went beyond the simple descriptions of the pioneers of the earlier part of the century, and he felt able to make direct contrasts and comparisons between the occupants of houses of different size. Russell's researches showed the disparity of death and infant mortality rates between the occupants of one-, two-, three- and four-room houses. Indeed, so great were the differences that he commented that there were in reality, four different cities, or city populations within Glasgow and that an individual's life chances were dictated by where they were located.⁵⁵

This was the general perspective which provided the basis of *Life in One Room*, but in order to make the impact he wanted, Russell had to go beyond mere statistics, and express himself in a powerful descriptive language. The audience for his lecture was located in the Park district of Glasgow which was perhaps the richest community in the city. These were people who lived in very large houses, with rooms for different purposes, with servants and with space. Recognition of this is very important if we are to understand the impact Russell's lecture was intended to make. The full title of the lecture when published in *The Sanitary Journal* a few weeks after it was given was 'Life in One Room: A Plea for the Dwellers in the Smaller Houses of Glasgow'.

⁵⁵ For examples of Russell's relentless use of statistics, particularly correlating house size and mortality, see 'The House in Relation to Public Health' (1887) and 'The Ticketed Houses of Glasgow' (1888), both reproduced in Chalmers, *Public Health*, 170-89, 206-28.

Russell pointed out the basic facts and figures to his audience: that 25% of the population of Glasgow lived in houses of one room, and 45% lived in houses of two rooms.

It is those small houses which produce the high death-rate of Glasgow ... which give to that death rate the striking characteristics of an enormous proportion of death in childhood. ... a death rate of 38 per thousand, while in the districts with larger houses it is only 16 or 17. Of all the children who die in Glasgow before they reach their fifth year, 32% die in houses of one apartment and not 2% in houses of five apartments and upwards.

Russell had been given the freedom to choose his own subject, and did so deliberately and almost certainly provocatively. ‘You go about the streets of this great City day by day, and I wish you to have an intelligent sympathy with the life of it.’ More than this, ‘I hold that it is our duty as Christian men and women to acquire that knowledge of our fellow-citizens which will give us a reasonable ground for determining the measure of our duty towards them.’ As has already been said, Russell retained enough of the spirit of Thomas Chalmers to believe that voluntary giving was healthier than compulsory taxation, though there is no instance of him ever arguing for reducing taxes or doing away with any of the specific taxes which funded the efforts of public health. Indeed in his fulmination against the unseating of Provost Blaikie in 1866 by a property-owner and ratepayer alliance, Russell referred to ‘that most righteous tax—the City Improvement Tax’.⁵⁶ And in *Life in One Room* he defended Glasgow’s municipal rates which provided basic amenities for small houses: ‘Taxation for such purposes is

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

eminently Christian in motive and effect. It may be called Christian Socialism.’ One can easily imagine some discomfort among his audience as Russell's talk continued.

The crucial point of the lecture, and what made it such a powerful document, came when Russell moved beyond ‘Percentages [which] are but a feeble mode of expression for such facts regarding men and women like ourselves’, and asked his audience to exercise their imaginations. The percentages translated into 126,000 fellow citizens living in one room, and 228,000 living in two rooms.

But is that all I can say? I might throw down that statement before you, and ask you to imagine yourselves, with all your appetites and passions, your bodily necessities and functions, your feelings of modesty, your sense of propriety, your births, your sicknesses, your deaths, your children,—in short your *lives* in the whole round of their relationships with the seen and the unseen, suddenly shrivelled and shrunk into such conditions of space. I *might* ask you, I *do* ask you, to consider and honestly confess what would be the result to you. But I would fain do more. Generalities are so feeble. Yet how can I speak to you decently of details?

What Russell then went on to do was address the various members of his audience as different members of a family: the mistress of the house, the wife, the husband, the sons, the daughters, the sick patient recuperating in their own room. He detailed to them their various hobbies, their amusements, their socialising, dinner parties, games of billiards, and so on, and then asked them to imagine doing all these while living—all together—within the confines of one room. It was a deceptively simple technique, but

one employed to dramatic effect. This was most eloquently done when Russell asked his audience to imagine their own deaths:

Last of all when *you* die, *you* still have one room to yourself, where in decency you may be washed and dressed and laid out for burial. If that one room were your house, what a ghastly intrusion you would be! The bed on which you lie is wanted for the accommodation of the living. The table at which your children ought to sit must bear your coffin, and they must keep your unwelcome company. Day and night you lie there until with difficulty those who carry you out thread their tortuous way along the dark lobby and down the narrow stair through a crowd of women and children. You are driven along the busy and unsympathetic streets, lumbering beneath the vehicle which conveys your scanty company to the distant and cheerless cemetery, where the acrid and deadly air of the city in which you lived will still blow over you and prevent even a blade of grass from growing upon your grave.⁵⁷

After this almost cruel exploitation of his audience's emotions, Russell changed tone, and blankly remarked, 'I think you will agree with me in this inference, that in the city in which we live there is a great room for the development of practical Christianity.'

It is very tempting to quote further though to do so would run the risk of reproducing the whole text. We can, however, place *Life in One Room*, and much of Russell's published oeuvre, in that sentimental (Dickensian) tradition identified by Strange.⁵⁸ The death and burial as described above provides melodrama in spades. In

⁵⁷ See Richard Rodger, 'The Victorian building industry and the housing of the Scottish working class', in Martin Doughty (ed.), *Building the Industrial City* (Leicester, 1986), 164. It should be pointed out that the original text contains 10 typos which have been corrected here.

⁵⁸ Strange, 'Sentiment and the Homeless Man', 243.

his direct appeal to his audience to put themselves in the situation of those who lived in one room Russell made the connection to a common humanity shared with the slumdweller. As he deliberately sought to provoke emotion in his audience, he particularly appealed for pity for the innocent children, ‘because of their helplessness, and because they are the men and women of the future’. Stating that ‘It is so easy to make a child happy’, he went on to describe how the impoverished childhood of the art critic Paul Merritt was transformed by watching an aconite grow in a garden. This is where Russell most closely verged on the caricature of Victorian sentimentalism, yet his intention remained consistent; by showing his audience how ‘by what simple means ... child nature may in its growth be turned upwards towards the light’ he encouraged them to identify with all poor children and their denied potential.

Russell’s direct appeal was for ‘practical Christianity’, for the well-off to exercise their ‘duty’ towards the poor: ‘the only hope for Glasgow lies in the Church’.⁵⁹ But in order to make that case Russell needed to stress the common humanity that he and the denizens of the West End shared with the inhabitants of the one-roomed house. He emphasised the influence of the ‘external world’ or ‘physical agents’ upon human thought and behaviour:

Place 126,000 human beings in one-room houses, and 43,000 in houses of five rooms and upwards, and, no matter who or what they are, you have at once determined for them much both of their moral and physical future.

⁵⁹ John Simon also saw sanitary reform as ‘practical Christianity’, but this did not stop the Fabians from using his work to support the idea of a state medical service. Christopher Hamlin, ‘Simon, Sir John (1816–1904)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford, 2010) [<http://www.oxforddnb.com.ezproxy.stir.ac.uk/view/article/36097>; accessed 31 May 2016]

Russell described what might be regarded as typical behaviour among the poor but cautioned against making easy value judgements:

There is no way of forming a just opinion as to these habits of the inhabitants of our small houses, but by calmly and conscientiously analysing what I might call the physics of our own morality.

He went on:

I confess for myself that the physical circumstances of the poor in Glasgow are so contrary in their nature to those which have surrounded me throughout my life and I recognize such a close relationship between my physical circumstances and the general character of my life, that I can come only to one or other of two conclusions: Either the poor belong to a different species of the genus man, or the same relationship must exist between *their* different physical circumstances and the general character of *their* lives.

For Russell, the slumdweller and he were made from the same human clay and this recognition, I would argue, raises questions how far he can be pigeon-holed as an agent of bourgeois 'surveillance and control'. While Damer quotes Russell's criticism of socialism within *Life in One Room*, he provides no other quotations nor does he identify the text or its subject.⁶⁰ Apart from anything else, what should give the historian pause for thought is that socialists, both contemporaneous with and after Russell, relied on his

⁶⁰ Damer, 'Engineers of the human machine', 2011.

authority, quoting his words as irrefutable proof not just of the general need for better housing but for the state provision of housing for the working class.

The Impact of Life in One Room

It is difficult to say what instant impact Russell's lecture may have had. As already stated it was reported in the local press, published more or less immediately in *The Sanitary Journal*, then later in 1888 as a separate pamphlet, and it would have been familiar to his colleagues in the public health movement in the UK and beyond. In wider political discourse Russell's talk was quoted extensively in Parliament as early as March 1889 during a debate on the Queen's speech. This was by C.A.V. Conybeare, the radical Liberal MP for Cornwall, in support of an amendment by R.B. Cunninghame Grahame, the officially Liberal though actually socialist M.P. for NW Lanarkshire, on the 'social conditions of the working classes'.⁶¹ While it would be ridiculous to credit a wider change of attitude towards the poor and their housing conditions just to the work and writings of Russell, it would be equally untenable to deny him an influence. Men such as Samuel Chisholm, the lord provost of Glasgow behind the next projected wave of municipal improvement at the turn of the century would have been utterly conversant with Russell's work; indeed Chisholm acknowledged the influence of *Life in One Room* on his own ideas on slum clearance.⁶² And I think one can detect some of Russell in Chisholm's own work, for instance in a paper on 'The Housing of the Submerged Tenth', given in 1895 to the Sanitary Association of Scotland. Chisholm pointed out that he did not like using this term, and he emphasised their common humanity in a way

⁶¹ Parliamentary Debates [Parl. Debs.], 3rd ser., vol. 333, cols 1062-1080, 6 March 1889.

⁶² Ironically the two men became opponents over the scale of Chisholm's proposals in the 1890s which Russell thought gave too little importance to public health. Robertson, *Glasgow's Doctor*, 161-4.

similar to Russell. To the question of whether a submerged tenth was preventable, Chisholm wrote:

I think I hear some hyper-Calvinist or maybe some mere cynic answer curtly, “the real reason is original sin; it is in the very constitution of things, and what we have got to do is make the best of a bad job”. But to such a one I would say, my friend, if original sin explains the submerged tenth, I fancy both you and I would have been there, and would have been found in its darkest and doomdest depths.⁶³

In 1902, and very much driven by Chisholm, Glasgow established a municipal commission to examine the housing of the poor.⁶⁴ The thrust of the commission’s findings was that, if the municipality was to provide housing, it should be for the very poorest only. Just as with the Glasgow presbytery in 1891, the majority view was that skilled workers had seen their wages rise sufficiently for them to afford decent housing if they chose, and that it was those on £1 per week or less who were losing out in the free market. The plan to raise another large sum of money on the rates, as with the improvement scheme, led to another ratepayers’ revolt and Chisholm was unseated by a highly dubious character and self-styled champion of the ‘poorer classes’, one Andrew Scott Gibson.⁶⁵

At the municipal commission, however, there were a number of labour and socialist witnesses, such as George Carson, the secretary of the trades council and

⁶³ *Sanitary Journal*, Feb. 1896, 629.

⁶⁴ Glasgow Municipal Commission on the housing of the poor, *Report and Recommendations* (Glasgow 1904); idem, *Minutes of Evidence* (Glasgow 1904).

⁶⁵ It would appear that Gibson was supported not only by those opposed to further municipalisation but also by the drinks trade. See Irene Maver, ‘Local Party Politics and the Temperance Crusade: Glasgow 1890-1902’, *Scottish Labour History* 27 (1992) 52, and J.J. Smyth, *Labour in Glasgow 1896-1936: socialism, suffrage, sectarianism* (East Linton, 2000), 51-3.

prominent member of the ILP. Carson articulated the view that the corporation should not build for the vicious or criminal classes, but for the respectable working class.

Exactly who should be housed was a major issue for working-class representatives, and another, which overlapped with this, was the one-room house. The commission took the view that while the one-room house was not ideal, nonetheless it had a role to play in housing certain groups such as elderly couples, single people, perhaps even a young family, or two sisters. The Labour view was utterly opposed—there was no place for the one-room house whatsoever.

Up to this point the housing issue, as far as organised working-class opinion went, was concerned mainly with the letting and missive system in Scotland, in particular the tradition of long, yearly lets with everyone changing house at Whitsunday. This had been the object of campaigns for some time, especially in the west central belt. Support came from Liberal and Liberal Unionist MPs such as Alexander Cross of Glasgow, and as late as 1907 a departmental committee was appointed to enquire into the issue, with the resulting House Letting Act, 1910 removing the worst abuses.⁶⁶ In the 1890s and early 1900s the leading figure of labour or working-class opinion in Glasgow's municipal politics was the Irish nationalist, John Ferguson. His practical activity as a councillor lay in securing minimum wages for corporation employees, while his wider rallying cry was the single tax on land values.⁶⁷ Ferguson's manifestos and election addresses included references to 'homes of light, sweetness and beauty', and house building in the suburbs, but with no detail on how this was to be achieved. His general propaganda point on high death and infant mortality rates, however, relied on reference

⁶⁶ Alexander Cross, *House Letting and the Missive System* (Camlachie Liberal Unionist Committee, 1894); I.G.C. Hutchison, *A Political History of Scotland 1832-1924: parties, elections and issues* (Edinburgh, 1986), 240; Sean Damer, 'State, class and housing: Glasgow 1885-1919', in Joseph Melling (ed.), *Housing, Social Policy and the State* (London, 1980), 85-9.

⁶⁷ E.W. McFarland, *John Ferguson 1836-1906: Irish issues in Scottish politics* (East Linton, 2003), 258-71; Smyth, *Labour in Glasgow*, 42-4.

to Russell as an incontrovertible authority: ‘Dr Russell has shown us how slum life means human deterioration. Houses without sunshine or air are hotbeds of disease and immorality.’⁶⁸

In 1898 Russell moved to Edinburgh as the medical member of the local government board of Scotland and he died in October 1904. He did not participate directly in the Glasgow municipal commission but his influence was palpable. At the commission a significant labour witness was councillor Joseph Burgess representing the ILP. Burgess, an English socialist and ex-editor of the *Workman’s Times*, was one of the first Labour figures in Scotland to popularise the notion that the local authority should build workmen’s cottages on the garden city model, rather than tenement flats. Though the final report of the commission dismissed the idea in two sentences it would be taken up to even greater effect by John Wheatley a few years later. Moreover, as Rosenberg has recently shown, the garden city ideal would go on to have a significant influence on the future construction of council housing in inter-war Scotland.⁶⁹

In his evidence Burgess used MOH statistics on mortality rates and relied heavily upon Russell, stating that the ILP

is opposed to the creation of one-apartment houses by the Corporation of Glasgow. The party considers that the recent revelations of the medical officer as to the rate of mortality in one-apartment houses put them entirely out of court.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ John Ferguson, *Glasgow the City of Progress* (1900), 6.

⁶⁹ Lou Rosenberg, *Scotland’s Homes Fit for Heroes: garden city influences on the development of Scottish working class housing* (Edinburgh, 2016). For specific detail on a single locality see J. J. Smyth & D.S. Robertson, ‘Lost Alternatives to Council Housing? An examination of Stirling’s alternative housing initiatives, c. 1906-1939’, *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies* 37: 2 (2017) 117-35.

⁷⁰ Glasgow Municipal Commission, *Evidence*, 254.

Burgess was pushed on this by one of the commissioners, the professor of forensic medicine at Glasgow, John Glaister, who worshipped at the same congregational church as Russell, but simply blamed poor conditions on the immorality of the poor.⁷¹ Glaister quoted the evidence given earlier by A.K. Chalmers who had admitted that ‘Poverty, drink and indifference are contributory causes [of high mortality]’.⁷²

Confronted with this apparent contradiction by the current MOH, Burgess responded with a (very) lengthy quote from Russell, ‘whose words I adopt and endorse’. The quote, unsurprisingly, was from *Life in One Room*. Pressed continuously by the commissioners on the one-room house and the types of tenants it might suit, Burgess replied:

I submit that there are other matters which are of more importance than the mere sanitary aspect of a house. There are matters which deal with the morals of the house, and on that point I must again put in Dr Russell ...

Burgess then quoted, once again and at length, from *Life in One Room*, the section where Russell asked his audience ‘to imagine yourselves, with all your appetites and passions, your bodily necessities and functions, your feelings of modesty, your sense of propriety, your births, your sicknesses, your deaths, your children ...’.⁷³

In its report the Commission recognised that ‘generally speaking, the smaller classes of houses contribute to the highest death-rates’, but they emphasised the qualifications entered by Chalmers, specifically that ‘the simple factor of density is an extremely limited one.’ This was reinforced by the repeated assertion of the

⁷¹ M.A. Crowther & Brenda White, *On Soul and Conscience: the medical expert and crime* (Aberdeen, 1988), 52.

⁷² Glasgow Municipal Commission, *Evidence*, 267.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 268.

commissioners that, ‘the one-room apartment house in Glasgow has much improved during recent years’.⁷⁴ Exactly how that ‘improvement’ was measured was not made clear. In the fifty years between 1861 and 1911 the proportion of the population of Glasgow living in one room fell significantly from 34% to 20%. At the same time, however, the actual number had fallen only marginally; there were still over 100,000 Glaswegians living in houses of one-apartment.⁷⁵

By the time of the War, however, and even more so during the War itself, the morality argument shifted. The evidence for this lies in the volumes of evidence and the majority report of the royal commission on the housing of the working classes in Scotland. Here, once again, the evidence of Dr Russell and his pamphlet played a crucial role. In the final report a whole chapter is dedicated to ‘The One Room House’ in which the voice of Russell is pervasive. Indeed the report uses the title *Life in One Room* to introduce the chapter and quotes extensively, and approvingly, from it.⁷⁶ A major focus of debate took place between one of the commissioners, Dr W.L. McKenzie, Russell’s successor at the local government board, and James Motion, Russell’s old colleague in the Glasgow philosophical society and who remained Glasgow’s inspector of the poor. Motion represented the spirit of Chisholm’s ‘hyper-Calvinist’; he was a man who held a very low opinion of the working classes, or at least those whom his work brought him into contact with, and he believed that the ‘thrifless’, the ‘improvident’ and the ‘drunken’ were rapidly increasing. Motion’s experience taught him that it was the tenants who made the slums, and McKenzie’s interrogation was designed to prove the fallacy of that conclusion. Motion was specifically asked if

⁷⁴ Glasgow Municipal Commission, *Report*, 6-7.

⁷⁵ The actual figures were 105,752 in 1861, and 103,815 in 1911. Over the period, however, the total population had increased from 395,503 to 784,496. Butt, ‘Working class housing’, 60, 81.

⁷⁶ PP, 1917-18, XIV (Cd 8731), *Royal Commission on the Housing of the Industrial Population of Scotland Rural and Urban, Report*, Chapter XI.

he was familiar with the works of Russell, and explicitly about whether or not he would ‘associate with Dr Russell’s views on ‘Life in One Room’. Backed into a corner, there was little else he could do but reply, ‘Yes.’⁷⁷

In its list of witnesses the royal commission broke new ground by calling a working-class housewife to give evidence to an official enquiry for the first time. This was Mrs Mary Laird, perhaps not quite a ‘typical’ housewife as she represented the Women’s Labour League, and would go on to play an active and leading role in the war-time rent strikes and Women’s Peace Crusade.⁷⁸ The interest the commissioners had in Mrs Laird was that she had direct experience of life in one room, and could describe the difficulties of family life in such circumstances. In the *Report* reference to Mrs Laird is made directly after a long quotation from *Life in One Room*—the bit about ‘imagine yourself’ and ending with the death and burial scene. Indeed, the commissioners regretted that they had not the space to reprint the whole pamphlet, but stated that ‘Dr Russell’s broad sketch has been filled in by Mrs Mary Laird’.⁷⁹

Mary Laird’s submission to the Commission was entitled, ‘Some Objections to the Single-Apartment House as a Home for a Married Couple’. She provided a genuine housewife’s perspective and not simply a re-write of *Life in One Room*, but it is difficult not to detect a clear echo of Russell. Laird described the exhausting routines of arranging the house around the differing needs and habits of father, mother, children and then made clear how much harder the work was in a one- or even two-room house than in a larger home. She was very informative on the difficulties of tending to infants,

⁷⁷ Royal Commission on Housing in Scotland, *Evidence, Vol. 2* (Edinburgh, 1921), 838. The evidence collected by the Commission was published in three volumes in 1921. In essence, however, the detail had already been produced in the Commission’s *Report* which was presented as a parliamentary paper during the war. All the quotes and references to Russell and *Life in One Room* used here are, with this one exception, taken from the *Report*.

⁷⁸ J.J. Smyth, ‘Rents, peace, votes: working class women and political activity in the First World War’, in Esther Breitenbach and Eleanor Gordon (eds), *Out of Bounds: women in Scottish society 1800-1945* (Edinburgh, 1992), 174-96.

⁷⁹ PP, 1917-18, Royal Commission, *Report*, 90-91.

but her greatest impact lay in describing the practicalities involved in the death of a child:

all the usual round of domestic duties ... have to be done with that still pale form ever before their view. Night comes and the household must go to rest, so the sad burden is now transferred from the bed and laid on the table, or it may be the coal bunker lid.⁸⁰

Conclusion

That Labour activists used Russell for their own purposes is hardly surprising. But that his work retained such an authority, and this one text in particular, does seem to be especially noteworthy. *Life in One Room* was not very widely available but seems to have been remarkably well-known. Perhaps battered samizdat copies of the original were passed around public health officials and members of the ILP. While Russell's pamphlet cannot, on its own, explain the shift in opinion that saw the majority of the royal commission condemn the one-room house as an unsuitable dwelling, clearly it had a huge influence on that judgement. Furthermore, events prior to and during the War within Glasgow in particular provided further vindication of Russell's words while helping to shift public opinion towards state provision of housing.

In 1911 in Glasgow an enquiry into house death rates was undertaken with the use of the data collated in the census of that year. The age and composition of the population of different sized houses could now be extracted, and the factor played by the house itself identified. A.K. Chalmers pointed this out in his evidence to the royal commission.⁸¹ His reticence of ten years previously at the municipal commission, in

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 91. Compare with Russell: '... their little bodies are laid on a table or on the dresser, so as to be somewhat out of the way of their brothers and sisters ...'.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 92-3.

blaming the house rather the habits of its occupants, was now gone, and Russell's fourfold division of the city by house size was confirmed. One of the major planks in the defence of those who saw the problem as essentially the moral failings of the poor had disappeared. Of equal, if not greater, importance was the industrial unrest in Clydeside during the War, and the rent strikes led by working-class housewives such as Mary Laird. In all the official reports and commentaries of this period, poor housing conditions were linked directly to the industrial unrest. According to the royal commission, 'bad housing may fairly be regarded as a legitimate cause of social unrest'.⁸² The official *History of the Ministry of Munitions* went even further and saw it as a justification:

If the Clyde workman has not always done all that he might have done to bring this War to a victorious issue, if he has followed the lure of drink, if he has shown a sullen and suspicious temper and embraced too readily revolutionary ideas and the gospel of class hatred, his Country, which has failed to provide for him the first condition of making a home for his family and himself, cannot with justice or good conscience cast the first stone.⁸³

And these words appear just after a lengthy quotation from, what else, Dr. Russell's *Life in One Room*. That *History* was published in 1920. Two years later Christopher Addison, architect of the 1919 Housing Act which introduced council housing on a national scale, wrote *The Betrayal of the Slums*. In that short book seven pages are

⁸² *Ibid.*, 345.

⁸³ *History of the Ministry of Munitions Vol. IV, The supply and control of Labour 1915 to 1916* (London, 1920), 44.

taken up by passages lifted straight from *Life in One Room*, including the ‘imagine’ section, and ending with the burial in that ‘distant and cheerless cemetery’. According to Addison, ‘Russell’s testimony is beyond question ...’.⁸⁴

Russell and *Life in One Room* continued to be referenced and quoted into the 1930s and beyond. One particular fan was the Rev. James Barr, Labour MP and minister of the United Free Church. Speaking in debates on housing in the House of Commons in 1938 and then in 1942, Barr drew attention to the continuing problem of overcrowding and the one-room house, referring directly to Russell’s findings and quoting the piece from *Life in One Room* where Russell asked his privileged audience to imagine their lives conducted in a single compartment. This should not surprise us, given that Barr served on the royal commission and was one of the authors of the majority report and perhaps the most vociferous opponent of the minority of the Commission who maintained ‘The old idea ... that people got the house they deserved, that they were physically and mentally of inferior stock ...’.⁸⁵ Another, more direct connection between Barr and Russell is that both attended John Bright’s rectorial address to the students of Glasgow University in March 1883 in which he referred to the reality that 41% of Glasgow families lived in one-room houses.⁸⁶ In fact Russell began *Life In One Room* with a reference to Bright’s speech, pointing out that the claim regarding housing conditions was greeted by ‘incredulous laughter’ from the audience. That a generation later such a response would have been unlikely if not impossible was due most of all to the work and writings of Dr Russell.

⁸⁴ Christopher Addison, *The Betrayal of the Slums* (London, 1922), 63-9.

⁸⁵ Parl. Debs., 5th ser., vol. 381, cols 743-822, 8 July 1942, and 5th ser., vol. 334, cols 1085-1161, 13 April 1938.

⁸⁶ While Russell gave 1884 as the year of Bright’s rectorial address, Barr was correct in stating 1883. See *Glasgow Herald*, 24 Mar. 1883 in which, interestingly, no mention is made of Bright’s comments about housing.

Those who quoted Russell as an unimpeachable authority, as the court of final judgement, were themselves, of course, partisan in these debates, not just disinterested observers. In quoting from *Life in One Room*—and it is remarkable just how lengthy those quotations tended to be—the proponents of what would become council housing used Russell; they did not have to accept his world view in order to take from him what they needed. And what they needed was proof that the housing market simply did not meet the physical and moral needs of the general population. That proof Russell provided in spades. He provided it, first and foremost, through his statistical analysis of the size of houses and the related mortality rates, but more than anything through his pathetic depiction of what *Life in One Room* might actually be like.

It can, however, be seen as naïve to accept Russell and the other sanitarians as straightforward champions of the poor. References to the ‘inmates’ of the small houses grate in a modern ear, and what are we to make of the likes of Gairdner, in his preface to Russell’s memorial volume, calling for, ‘a really beneficent rule that would make the permanent residence of what may be called a parasitic class *impossible*, either in town or country’.⁸⁷ Yet we cannot identify such views as inherently anti-socialist since so many in the labour and socialist movement pre-1914 shared similarly authoritarian and disciplinary attitudes towards the residuum or slumdweller.⁸⁸ Moreover, it is hardly sufficient, though necessary, to remind ourselves that such demonization of the poor continues today.⁸⁹ Yet, collectively as well as individually, the sanitarians provided much more than ‘feeble’ statistics. They provided a moral and emotional case for better

⁸⁷ Chalmers, *Public Health*, viii, emphasis in original. Gairdner did admit that under ‘the pressure of official responsibility’ he would not have expressed such views.

⁸⁸ Smyth, *Labour in Glasgow*, 25-7.

⁸⁹ See Lynsey Hanley, *Estates: An intimate history* (London, 2007) and Owen Jones, *Chavs: the demonization of the working class* (London, 2011).

housing that could not be ignored for ever, even if the road taken post-1918 would not have been their choice. Such can be the ironies of history.

Had he lived, Russell, the congregationalist, the Liberal who became a Liberal Unionist, may have been surprised, even disappointed that his work should have been used so relentlessly by those campaigning for council housing. But, in truth he could not be too shocked, since he had pointed out the political potential of housing as early as 1888, just weeks after delivering *Life in One Room*. In a lecture given that summer, and with a clear inference to the Mid-Lanark by election which brought Keir Hardie to public prominence, Russell wrote that the miner

is the object of much attention just now, lectured by socialist missionaries, coquetted with by labour candidates, startled by meteoric MPs, who blaze and fulminate through the land. But among all the nonsense poured into their ears I have not noticed that anyone has taken this solid fact as his political platform—that they are the worst housed and most sanitary neglected class in broad Scotland, and that he will endeavour to improve their condition in this respect.⁹⁰

They may not have been listening then, but the message got through eventually. It was the Scottish Miners Union which was behind the establishment of the royal commission in 1912, in which Russell and his short pamphlet were to be so exhaustively referenced and so triumphantly vindicated, even if not quite in the manner he might have wished.⁹¹

⁹⁰ *Sanitary Journal*, Jul. 1888, 140.

⁹¹ PP, 1917-18, Royal Commission, *Report*, 1-2.