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## Getting a Living. Getting a Life: Leonora Eyles, Employment and Agony 1925-1930

### *Introduction: 'A Feminine Class Consciousness'*

Nowadays, far from being a disgrace to work, it is a disgrace not to.(1)

...very few human beings can stand leisure; something atrophies, and they become degenerate. It is the busy woman who makes time to read, to think, in a word to Live who is best fitted to be a wife, a mother, and a friend.(2)

Leonora Eyles remains a relatively unknown figure today, yet her work as a journalist, novelist and author of sociological texts was both prolific and impressive.(3) Figure 1.1. Her eclectic journalistic output includes articles for literary periodicals such as *Time and Tide*, newspapers – she contributed to *The Daily Herald* and *The Times*, for instance - and correspondence columns for magazines. In the rapidly expanding market for women's magazines in the 1920s and 1930s she carved out a niche for herself as one of the country's most respected 'agony aunts', reaching out to 'thousands of women – as sisters and daughters, mothers and lovers, as workers in both the home and the public workplace, who read her columns avidly.'(4)

A lifelong socialist, Eyles rejected an economic and social order based on competition and insisted that relationships of subordination between men and women were equally damaging. These ideas inform and structure her writing. It was, however, her ability to communicate them through her lived experience of insecurity - the legacy of a traumatic childhood, marked by her alcoholic father's bizarre and unpredictable behaviour and the premature death of her mother - that makes her work so distinctive and affecting. Eyles's story of struggle and survival, from riches to rags and back to riches again, is the stuff of magazine fiction. In her memoir she explains how a talent for writing and a strong sense of religious and political ethics as a Christian Socialist sustained her through hardships in early adult life (not least when she had to raise her young children alone), instilling a deeply felt need to address poverty, hardship, inequality and injustice through her work, something that emerges strongly in her work as an agony aunt.(5)

Part of Eyles's originality was her belief in popular media as a conduit for social change. This was particularly true of the correspondence page, which she regarded as a space for readers to share what could often be highly challenging problems, including poverty and ill health, even

abuse, as well as romantic dilemmas. The magazine problem page, for Eyles, was a serious concern and, at a time when often there were few other places to turn, she worked to forge a supportive community that was both ‘imagined’ and, on occasion, met in real life.(6) This chapter explores that process and considers how Eyles created a particular ethos and sense of community for readerships in different magazines. It focuses on the period from 1925-1929 when she edited columns for *Modern Woman*, a consumer monthly targeted at middle-class housewives and professional women, and the left wing *Lansbury’s Labour Weekly*, an independent labour publication whose declared aim, in its editor’s words, was to appeal to and convert, ‘men in the workshop and women at the washtub who are not yet class-conscious’.(7)

**[INSERT FIGURE 1.1 HERE]**

(Margaret) Leonora Eyles (née Pitcairn) (Mrs D.L. Murray), photograph by Howard Coster, 1934 © National Portrait Gallery, London

Careful comparison of these pages: the topics selected, the tone and nature of advice, and the approaches she adopted, moreover, suggest a mode of progressive cross-pollination, as Eyles adapted strategies from the socialist press to give agency to *Modern Woman* readers, while shaping a feminist sensibility for the *Labour Weekly’s* readership. Such hybridising tendencies, additionally inform her fiction and non-fiction writing as well as her journalism; all were connected in Eyles’s political-literary imaginary. It is no coincidence, for instance, that the destitute heroine of her first novel, the best-selling *Margaret Protests* (1919), saved her family by selling abortifacients through magazine small ads, while polemical texts such as *Women’s Problems of To-day* (1926), *Careers for Women* (1930) and *Common Sense About Sex* (1933) were drawn from her experience as an agony aunt. Reading across the various genres that Eyles wrote in suggests how powerfully she developed, and communicated, her ideas in the spaces between fiction and ‘real life’. The problem page: a semi-public/semi-private construct, which dealt in raw emotion, albeit often in coded form, provided an ideal vehicle for this.

The 1920s was a decade of progress and upheaval when women gained the vote, entered parliament and local government, and worked in factories, offices and shops alongside men.(8) The 1921 census showed over half a million women in the labour force - a figure that omitted the large numbers of uninsured workers, for instance, in domestic service – and

numbers of insured female workers grew more rapidly than men.(9) To employ Sally Alexander's vivid metaphor, 'Office cleaners, packers, shop assistants, typists became the unlikely and suddenly visible shock troops of industrial restructuring.'(10) In magazines and other media the working woman was principally characterised as young and single. The bob-haired bachelor or business girl who worked in an office earning a little extra cash to spend on cigarettes, lipstick, the pictures or new dress styles, to a large extent reflected real change. Between 1901 and 1931 more than two-thirds of working women were under thirty and more than three-quarters of them were single, while the most dramatic shift was in the occupational distribution of women away from domestic service and the textile industries to 'white-blouse' office and secretarial work.(11) A large number of women in the over-thirty five age group, however, also worked and trends began to reverse after 1931 when single women comprised fifty one per cent of the workforce aged over thirty five.(12) Above all, there was a marked tendency for single women of all ages and classes to work, resulting in a degree of disposable income that made them an important target audience for consumer magazines wishing to attract advertising.

Published in 1925 *Modern Woman*, as its title suggests, was consciously modernising. The strapline, 'The Journal with the New Spirit of the Age' further underlined the magazine's progressive intent.(13) The first editorial in June addressed 'the woman of to-day' and promised a 'new era both in journalism and in the lives of women'. The young, fashionably dressed business girl and the successful career woman became symbols of the freedoms, real or imagined, that modern life offered. The expanding field of employment in, for instance, modern hotels or on ocean liners was explored in 1927; 'The Sea as a Career for women' explored Miss Victoria Drummond's employment as a marine engineer, as well as openings for stenographers, hairdressers and shop assistants.(14) A 1929 series about successful career women such as advertising executive Florence Sangster, beautician Helena Rubinstein and the educationalist Margaret MacMillan was designed to appeal to the publication's target audience of professionally-minded women.(15) Yet, with a formal marriage bar in place in teaching and the civil service, and an informal bar operating in occupations such as journalism, the prevailing idea that a 'woman's place' was in the home persisted.

One of a group of consumer monthlies which, magazine historian Cynthia White describes as offering women readers an 'intimate personal service', with a secondary emphasis on entertainment', *Modern Woman* promoted the value and quality of advice delivered by named

experts such as Eyles.(16) This marked a turning point in women's publishing, which was re-orientated away from the servant-keeping leisure classes towards the middle ranks. Styling itself 'the magazine that HELPS and ENTERTAINS', *Modern Woman* was organised into nine Service Departments across five areas of interest: housewifery and child craft, fashion and appearance, home decoration, 'personal' (which included the correspondence page) and children. With a cover price of six pence for around eighty pages of fiction, features, and additional colour inserts, these middle-market consumer monthlies depended heavily on income from selling space to advertisers. While editors fiercely defended the independence of editorials, visually appealing advertisements were increasingly grouped persuasively alongside appropriate content and scattered throughout the magazine.(17)

Eyles, perhaps surprisingly, was enthusiastic about the ~~education al~~ educational benefits and liberating power of advertising. In *The Woman in the Little House* (1922), her crusading book based on first-hand experience of bringing up her family in ill-adapted housing in Peckham, she applauded the 'columns of advice about dress, health and toilet matters' in magazines, which could stir women from 'lethargy, complacency or hopelessness' by making 'Mrs. Britain and her sisters dissatisfied with themselves and their surroundings.'(18) She was not alone in holding such views. Jennifer Scanlon, in her analysis of the American *Ladies' Home Journal*, highlights the 'social service goals' of advertising in the period when progressive women with backgrounds in suffrage or social work moved into advertising in the belief that they could better improve women's lives.(19) In England, Ethel M. Wood, a Director of the Samson Clark agency and a prominent advocate of women in advertising, shared this concept of a 'service' ethos in advertising, which in Britain aligned with the public service ethos of such organisations as the BBC.(20) Additionally advertising, as Eyles later noted, was the only field in which women were appointed to posts with salaries anything like those of men and with 'a chance of work of real scope and responsibility.'(21)

In 1909 the author and play write Cicely Hamilton had called for a new sense of fellowship among women, a 'feminine class-consciousness' that could be fostered through awareness of disadvantages held in common.(22) In the early decades of the twentieth century the correspondence or agony column, which by this stage was firmly established as women's domain, offered a space in which concerns could be shared and a common sense of female identity forged beyond class, at least to some degree.(23) As a socialist and a feminist Eyles grasped the potential of the problem page to connect with women, inspire them and galvanise

them to action. The next section will explore some of the strategies she developed to ‘raise consciousness’ in the socialist press.

### ***‘Problems of Real Life’: Lansbury’s Labour Weekly***

George Lansbury, Socialist leader of Poplar council and later leader of the Labour Party, launched *Lansbury’s Labour Weekly* in February 1925 as the only independent Labour paper.(24) Contributors included such notable figures as the Labour M.P. Ellen Wilkinson and the socialist and journalist Raymond Postgate. Eyles wrote a weekly column, ‘The Woman’s Part’, which outlined a progressive agenda for women. Her first rousing editorial introduced the central theme of ‘wakening’ those who were ‘passively enduring’ lives with ‘half a dozen children and 30 shillings a week to feed and clothe them’, or living in ‘two rooms in Bethnal Green and Deptford trying to keep decency about them.’(25) Passionate about the power of female agency, Eyles argued that the ‘nation is in the little homes.’ She believed that if she could inspire women with a vision: a ‘picture of the world as they could make it’, they would be stirred to direct action to bring about change.

Competition from the *Sunday Worker* soon halved the *Labour Weekly’s* circulations. Lansbury fought back with a new format that adapted strategies from the capitalist press for socialist ends. Innovations included ‘popularly written, entertaining and useful articles and stories’ and ‘bright’ visuals that, interestingly, he claimed would make the paper ‘truly representative of the lives and feelings of the people.’(26) In effect this meant stronger visual content: a striking pictorial cover (red, of course), sketches and cartoons, sheet music (‘great Labour battle songs’), a ‘Tit-Bits’ style ‘two-minute Socialist sermon,’ human interest stories in the form of moving dramas from the police courts, a sports column and, despite the paper’s opposition to capitalism, increased advertising.(27) Eyles contributed investigative journalism and fiction about the dramas of everyday life. She even ran a short story competition for readers - billed as, ‘the *human* story’ a tale of real people up against real life’ - but it was on her correspondence page: ‘Problems of Real Life’ where readers’ stories were most often to be found.(28)

‘Problems of Real Life’ was penned by Martha. The pseudonym referenced the biblical figure whose association with domestic management and active service in the community symbolized Eyles’s commitment to direct action through domestic agency. The column

covered an amazingly diverse range of topics from housing, health and fears about mental illness to sexual urges, requests for work, marriage tangles, pension difficulties and dreadful cases of poverty, abuse, drunkenness and debt.(29) Two inter-related themes dominate: unemployment, which Eyles described as '[t]he only problem that beats me,' and the terrible personal consequences of poverty and financial instability.(30) 'All the time I am getting letters from people asking me to relieve them of their kiddies,' Eyles wrote, referring to the pitiful parents and desperate single mothers with illegitimate babies searching for someone to 'take on the job of caring' until they 'get on their feet'. (31) The flipside of unemployment was the fantasy of a career and letters from young people dreaming of the glamorous fields of writing, modelling and fashion, which regularly appeared in the column.(32)

Eyles's replies were supportive yet realistic; 'Nothing in art or, indeed in any walk of life is won without effort,' she advised a young flour mill worker who wanted to draw for the illustrated weeklies. Ever the pragmatist, she warned an aspiring young journalist that 'Writing too much for Labour papers will make you get a propagandist style'.(33) A woman whose husband was unemployed and 'must make money to feed the children' asked about the viability of homeworking with knitting machines. '[N]ot a money-making proposition,' Eyles cautioned, suggesting that it would 'be safer to hire a sewing machine and do mending and making.'(34) A sharp rejoinder to a letter complaining about spendthrift workers when the middle-classes struggle on reduced capital reminds us that the right to work was a foundation of her socialism; 'we don't believe that people should live on dividends. Everyone should work... You who do not work are really bankrupt, because you cannot redeem your money by your labour,' she tartly replied.(35)

Most striking, perhaps, is the manner in which the column shaped a community identity and operated as a shared resource. Eyles's rhetorical yet highly personal style was instrumental in this. Readers were addressed as 'friend' and 'comrade' while offers and requests for rooms, jobs and material support were printed alongside advice in the form of a friendship club or mutual support agency. A young amputee, for instance, secured work on a farm but was unable to do his job because his crutches were worn and inadequate. Eyles appealed for contributions to purchase an artificial limb.(36) Particular ventures built momentum over the weeks, notably a scheme titled 'Martha's children' that collected and redistributed clothing for families in distress.(37) On occasion Eyles offered personal help to intervene with the Welfare Committee or to lend her flat as a venue for Russian classes, for instance.(38) Eager

to instil Christian values of charity she, nevertheless, never shied away from revolution and urged her readers to view their daily struggles as ‘epics’ that would inspire others to rise up and ‘smash the system that causes them.’(39)

### ***‘From One Woman to Another’: Working for the Capitalist Press***

The publisher George Newnes, who backed the left wing *Daily Herald*, also published *Modern Woman* where Eyles’s correspondence page, ‘From One Woman to Another,’ ran for five years until October 1929. In contrast to the *Labour Weekly*, *Modern Woman*’s target audience comprised career women, suburban housewives and the daughters of the expanding middle-classes.(40) Many had gained the vote in 1918 and their numbers would expand in 1928. For Eyles, writing for a commercial publication that professed progressive intentions must have represented an important opportunity to reach and inspire this potentially powerful new audience of professional women and housewife citizens.(41) Like *Good Housekeeping*, *Modern Woman* presented itself as a ‘forum for rational debate’.(42) Its model of modern, home-based femininity, which accommodated and even enhanced participation in public life, had obvious appeal for Eyles. Her column, moreover, represented a chance to carve out a space in the mainstream women’s press; a counter-public sphere in which the notions of community and (working) class consciousness forged the *Labour Weekly* could be inflected for a female readership.(43) ‘Women talk to each other in a way that men don’t share’, Eyles observed in *The Woman in the Little House*, and her belief in the power of female reciprocity and community informed her column’s title, and its editorial ethos.(44)

It is difficult to describe ‘From One Woman to Another’ as an agony column, partly because it was as likely to deal with questions about training and employment as romantic dilemmas.(45) Eyles, moreover, adopted an ‘intimate and subjective voice to get alongside her readers’.(46) ‘Voice’ was, and remains, a vital means of communicating a magazine’s ‘personality’; it helped guarantee a publication’s reliability and build rapport with its readership. Nowhere was this more important than on the correspondence page, which addressed readers’ public, private and intimate lives. This research is part of a wider project about interwar women’s magazines, which involved talking to around fifty women about their memories of reading magazines as well as interviews with two journalists working in the period.(47) Many told me that, on opening their magazine, they routinely turned to the problem age first, along with a serial if they were following one. In contrast to the



sentimental, moralizing tone and conventional guidance about 'boy trouble' or etiquette dispensed by more orthodox aunts, such as the generic Mrs Marryat at *Woman's Weekly* or even *Woman's Evelyn Home* (both journalistic pseudonyms), Eyles's advice could be challenging, was often surprising, and she used her real name.

Her first editorial made a virtue of the fact that her instruction was grounded in hard-won experience, long before she read 'Havelock Ellis, Bloch or Freud'.(48) The synthesis of the drama of lived experience with contemporary scientific thinking on sexology and psychiatry was characteristic of Eyles, who described herself as 'one who had been through the vales of affliction and come out smiling, smashed, ideals dragged in the mud, everything lost'.(49) Uncompromisingly frank, she was not afraid to unsettle established feminine norms. Older women, in particular, were encouraged to assert their needs above those of others; Eyles had no truck with self-sacrifice. When, for instance, thirty year old 'Alice' - who had been left to 'scrape along' on £100 a year after devoting her life to nursing an invalid aunt - received a marriage proposal from a man who drank, Eyles did not equivocate. '[M]en drink to escape and marriage to him would be an unending burden to carry'. 'Learn a profession' and be 'self-reliant', she instructed, adding '[s]ome women rejoice in sacrifice, and find greater pleasure in it than in a life of comfort. And then, too, some women would rather have torture than loneliness. But don't say I didn't warn you'.(50) Ever attuned to the heroism of everyday lives, Eyles remarked on the 'epic' quality of the letters she received, both at the *Labour Weekly* and *Modern Woman*.(51) '[A]lmost all the people who write to me seem to be doing heroic things and doing them with every possible obstacle against them', she remarked in *Modern Woman*, before going on to reflect on the correlation between 'fiction and real life'.(52) Dramatizing her own life, Eyles also dramatized the lives of her readers in order that they might see themselves in sharper focus; a form of emotional, social and political consciousness-raising that was grounded in her experience of 'direct action' socialism.

'How shall I get my living?' was the question around half her correspondents asked, Eyles later recalled in *Careers for Women* (1930). A central aim was to expand the parameters of respectable female employment; 'No longer now is every girl forced to live dependent on her parents or a husband, or become a teacher, dressmaker, nurse, shop-assistant, or domestic worker', she declared.(53) In her *Modern Woman* page she dealt with questions about office work, hairdressing, beauty culture, child-care, midwifery, librarianship, dressmaking, teaching, film, fashion illustration, writing and journalism, music (in orchestras, cinemas and

cafes), handicrafts, small business, religious and voluntary work, as well as domestic service, cookery and related occupations.(54) An emphasis on professional occupations reflected the magazine's middle-class readership, but Eyles was careful to include low-cost alternatives. Elidor M. Briggs, reflecting the economic crisis of the early 1930s, developed this approach in a column that opened with "Careers with little or no training costs" and a salutary warning that if a girl could not depend on her family for security, neither could she 'fall back on marriage.'(55) Weekly papers targeted at wider audiences took a more romantic, even exotic approach to employment, which appeared less often on their correspondence pages. In 1919, a period of exceptionally high female unemployment, *Woman's Weekly* ran a regular career column which, among other jobs, recommended work as a masseuse in a Turkish bath or as a stage door hand.(56) In the 1930s *Home Chat* endorsed nursing as a way to see the world and extolled the benefits of setting up a profit-sharing business selling the latest dress- models to country women. *Woman*, meanwhile, emphasized glamour. Vyrnwy Biscoe, author of *300 Careers for Women*, authored the column, signaling aspirations for a continued expansion of work for women, not just educated professionals. All these publications engaged in re-imagining employment from a female perspective. None, however, responded directly to readers' circumstances in the way that Eyles did, nor were they grounded in her politics and activism.

Numerous requests for information about how to earn a living from feminine endeavors suggest the plight of middle-class households facing financial constraints; '[h]undreds of girls' wanted to 'commercialize' their accomplishments, Eyles maintained.(57) 'Maidie', who had two musical children but could not support them through a long training, enquired which instrument was best from the 'money-earning point of view,' while 'Kit' in Devon asked how to turn 'a good art training into money'.(58) The aspirations of the magazine's youthful readers were markedly similar to those of the *Labour Weekly's* young socialists; many dreaming of work in the glamorous fields of journalism, fashion and film.(59) Eyles's advice, however, differed. Whereas, *Modern Woman* readers were encouraged to be ambitious and improve their prospects - Violet, for instance, was told that she was 'obviously superior' to basic office work and should attend evening classes, learn languages and shorthand – job security was a foregrounded as a principle concern for the *Weekly's* readership.(60)

The 'vexed question of equal pay for equal work' was never discussed, it may have been considered inappropriate in a commercial magazine whose business was the culture of feminine self-improvement.(61) Believing passionately that matching a girl's training to her aptitude would go at least some way towards redressing inequalities in the workplace, Eyles urged *Modern Woman* readers to plan for a career and seek out job satisfaction, advice rarely given on the *Labour Weekly*. Details about training, pay and conditions in the recently professionalized field of midwifery, in Froebel and Montessori methods of teaching, beauty culture and hairdressing were offered to help women get 'out of the rut' and avoid frustrated ambitions. Eyles herself had wanted to be a gardener or a doctor but was forced to train as a teacher, an occupation she loathed.(62) Those without funds were directed to apprenticeships or opportunities to train on the job.(63)

Proponents of Domestic Economics in America strove to elevate home industry into a 'household science;' a theoretical and practical reassessment of women's activity that reached out into wider society.(64) The Labour Party's Women's Labour League saw home as potentially a base for the empowerment of women and put forward demands for material change in living conditions as well as in the routines of housework.(65) Eyles was similarly optimistic about the future for professionalized domestic work within the context of an active female citizenship and an expanded state that had the radical potential to redefine the public sphere as a 'domesticated' public life.(66) In 1929 in *Modern Woman*, she predicted that domestic service 'bids fair to be the sort of job a High School or Secondary School girl will like to take up.'(67) 'Mothering Careers' occupied a separate category in *Careers for Women* (it consisted of 'Hand Work', 'Creative Work' and 'Routine Work'). Housewifery, which included domestic science, cookery and domestic service, was ascribed a 'very high place,' the equivalent of such 'almost god like tasks as medicine and teaching' for, as Eyles explained

There is no work of higher importance to the nation than the running of a home and all that it implies; for lives are still largely lived in our homes, and unless they are made comfortable by efficient housekeeping, and unless the health of the people is maintained by good and intelligent cooking, all the work of teaching, doctors, statesmen, artists, and poets is undone.(68)

Concerned to raise the status of domestic work, she was critical of the limited specialism that resulted from division of labour in factories, preferring to celebrate the 'quick-witted, nimble

fingered' domestic servant who is 'full of resource.' Few letters from domestics appeared on Eyles's page, however, and features about domestic service in magazines were generally addressed to mistresses rather than maids, even in tuppenny weeklies.(69) This, no doubt, was due to the aspirational nature of popular magazines, which promoted the pleasures of marriage and a 'home of one's own' above more radical ideals of the professionalized well-trained, well-paid domestic worker and housewife citizen.

While some in the socialist movement imagined a future in which technology would abolish housework, for Eyles the knowledge and skills associated with domestic work and home crafts would make an important contribution to the brave new world of women's employment.(70) The 1920s and 1930s witnessed a craft revival with courses, specialist publications and information about how to make things for the home springing up everywhere, including women's magazines.(71) Eyles envisaged a raft of small businesses developed from domestic skills in needlework, embroidery, cookery and other crafts, which could be run from home, providing independence and, in many cases, essential income. 'There is a great demand, nowadays, for hand-made things of all sorts, from underwear to lampshades and bags; hand-made wooden goods are also popular,' she told *Modern Woman* readers in 1927.(72) The question of how to make money at home reappeared a few months later when a 'crop of letters' requested advice. Make 'distinctive things that will sell at fairly low prices to middle-class people,' such as children's clothes for mothers who 'don't like factory made ones yet cannot afford West-End prices,' Eyles's advised, revealing a keen sensitivity to the dilemma of holding cultural aspirations on restricted means.(73) The difficulty of monetising accomplishments that were regarded as leisure activities, or were central to what the historian Claire Langhamer terms the 'definitional ambiguity' of housework, is documented by Steven Gelber in his fascinating study of the American hobby crafts movement. Gelber argues that, while handicraft hobbies 'passively condemn the work environment by offering contrast to meaningless jobs,' they are inherently conservative because they reinforce a conventional work ethic by integrating 'the isolated home with the ideology of the workplace.'(74) Whereas, Gelber's analysis only makes sense when, as he put it, 'remunerative employment' exists elsewhere, Eyles's focus on the liberating potential of home crafts as a means for women to lay claim to and re-imagine work speaks to a period when women experienced very real difficulties finding secure, well-paid work of an equal status with men.(75)

The specter of the ‘untrained woman’ haunted Eyles’s page.(76) She developed a chapter in *Careers for Women* from the numerous ‘pathetic letters’ from middle-class married or elderly women (most likely *Modern Woman* readers) ‘begging’ for information about how to make money from home work ‘without the neighbors knowing.’ ‘The next generation will not suffer as they have done’, she vowed.(77) Her response was to transform dependence into independence through action, advising women to ‘strike out’ and find work based on their caring and domestic skills, or identify ‘some need of the community, and set to work to fill it.’(78) Suggestions ranged from running a boarding house to a business serving the needs of struggling working women; ‘[A] fair number of young mothers of illegitimate children are trying pluckily to maintain their standard of living and bring up the child unaided’, she remarked, drawing no doubt on her experience at the *Labour Weekly*.(79) Young women who contravened established codes of respectability were also at risk. ‘Elsie’, who was forced to leave home after falling in love with her mother’s lodger, asked how to secure a post as a ‘companion’; try ‘mother’s help...earning a living and doing a great human service,’ Eyles replied.(80) Inspired by her Christian ethics and her knowledge of the networks of reciprocity that operated in working-class neighborhoods, Eyles imagined a system where an expanding female workforce would outsource domestic needs (food, mending, childcare) to well paid professionals or small businesses run by untrained, yet entrepreneurial, women.(81)

‘[A] lifetime of complete independence and of supporting my family alone’ shaped Eyles’s deeply held views on the controversial topic of the working wife. Like Olive Schreiner and Vera Brittain she was highly critical of parasitic middle and upper-class women who married to be ‘kept’, but unlike them she identified the working-class wife who is ‘never anything but a financial asset to her husband’ as a model for rethinking ‘modes of living’.(82) Rather than undermining marriage and motherhood Eyles extended and revalued it, arguing that the working wife who contributed her share of the household expenses was the equal of, and a valid alternative to, the stay-at-home wife. Her advice, nevertheless, varied according to a woman’s circumstances; for Eyles motherhood remained perhaps the most important job. So, whereas ‘Eileen’, who hated housework and wanted to return to dressmaking against her husband’s wishes – he wanted to support her himself – was told to dismiss this ‘old-fashioned idea...You would be much happier with a job you can do well than one you do badly’, ‘Mrs A’, who worked, employed a maid, was ‘bored stiff’ and contemplating an affair, was sternly reproached for taking marriage ‘on the surface’; ‘Leave your work, stay at home and run your house and have a baby as soon as possible. Then you will see what marriage means’, Eyles

rebuked.(83) Her ideal was for women to be ‘useful to the community, financially self-supporting, and spiritually at home in their working environment,’ inside and outside the home.(84)

### ***‘A Home or Business of their Own’: the Self-Reliant Woman***

It isn’t that women are not good employees; they are, but their conditions of employment are often very hard, and offer little outlet for their immense creative ability. There is not wealth to be made in these small, personal undertakings, but there is a living and a Life, which to most thinking people matters most.(85)

For many single and some married women finding a job became an accepted part of growing up and becoming a woman in these years.(86) The historian Selina Todd reports that ‘self-sufficiency gained through secure employment’ was a central theme in her interviews with working-class women, while all but a few of the women readers I contacted worked, at least before marriage; the working girl heroines of fiction were recalled with particular affection.(87) Oral testimonies show that paid work, the conviviality and little extra spending money it implied, was central to a shared imaginary of modern womanhood.(88) Magazines with their experimental career columns, features about successful women and articles exploring office girl gripes offered readers a space to reflect critique and dream about what the world of work might be, and mean.

Eyles’s column, which was shaped by her personal experience, feminist, political and religious convictions, as well as her belief that revolution starts in the home, made an important contribution to the discourse of modern work identities, including that of the housewife and mother. Just as George Lansbury adopted targeting strategies from the capitalist press to extend the reach of socialism, Eyles adapted a working-class ethos of communality and socialist strategies of direct action to the mainstream women’s press to raise consciousness, and increase agency.

This revolution of domestic and private life, nevertheless, was not without its critics. While favourably reviewing *The Woman in the Little House* in 1922 Stella Browne, the forthright advocate of birth control, remained unconvinced by Eyles’s belief that a socialist state would emerge without extensive structural change.(89) More recently, the literary historian Maroula Joannou argued that Eyles’s fiction represents an ‘escape from, rather than an assault on,

patriarchal values'.(90) However, Browne refers to a polemical piece and Joannou to the novels. Neither writer considers the rich network of connections between Eyles's journalism, her fiction and non-fiction writing. It is when we attend to this; to how certain themes develop and emerge through and across genres that the truly pioneering and radical nature of her work begins to emerge. Sensitive to different readerships and their constituencies, Eyles was also alert to problems, aspirations and experiences that might be shared across genres, and across classes, particularly when the audience was women.

Whether aimed at socialists, working wives, middle class-professional women, housewives, a broad popular readership (*Margaret Protests*, after all, was a best seller), or any combination of these, Eyles's writing shares a socially concerned ethos expressed through a democratic cross-fertilization of difficulties, hopes and dreams. Themes weave in and out of texts, are honed, deepened and given impact through personal testimony. The problem page, which encouraged readers to voice their stories, connects and informs the other writing; a mode of inter-textual storytelling and mutual knowledge exchange. Tracing a central theme, the concern to improve conditions for workers, including those working unpaid in the home, gives some sense of how this works. The novel *Hidden Lives* (1922) follows the desperate struggle of the young doctor, Helen Clevion to help the female inhabitants of an impoverished street in the Staffordshire potteries establish a community centre and nursery.(91) Eyles's father ran a pottery works in Staffordshire and she knew the poisonous conditions that workers faced; the topic is the subject of a series of investigative pieces for *Lansbury's Labour Weekly* in 1925.(92) The need for support services for working mothers was also discussed in the *Weekly*. 'One of these days we shall have a crèche and a playhouse in every street, where children can be left for a few coppers while mother works and plays', Eyles anticipated; an aspiration that she reiterated in the Labour publication, *Women's Problems of To-day* (1926), and later informed her advocacy of domestic and caring careers in *Modern Woman* (1929).(93) These thoughts finally come together in *Careers for Women* (1930) where Eyles visualises a 'more rational communal life' with communal kitchens and nurseries staffed by well-trained, paid professionals; an interconnected network in which women of all ages, abilities and social classes work together according to their interests and abilities, whether that be running a 'small-holding', 'shop-keeping', 'professional mothering' or 'various art and craft works'.(94)

Eyles understood the struggles, contradictions and frustrations of self-reliant womanhood. When ‘Joyce,’ a Sydenham schoolmistress who longed to marry, complained that her independent status discouraged men, Eyles replied, ‘It is only convention that men don’t like self-reliant women’.(95) Only a year before in *Good Housekeeping*, however, she had revealed how becoming a divorcee had led her to question deeply held assumptions about independence, blaming her ‘pride’ at being self-reliant for the breakdown of her marriage.(96) The following decade she candidly confessed in the same magazine that struggling to be so many things: a mother, wife, business woman (she ran a small poultry farm), writer, political activist, she feared that she had succeeded at none, resulting in a ‘feeling of inadequacy’ that made her ill for a time.(97) This article was written at the end of the 1930s when, married to D. L. Murray editor of the *Times Literary Supplement* and penning an agony column for the high-selling *Woman’s Own*, Eyles had re-entered the middle-class mainstream, both in her professional and private life. Her ability, nevertheless, to speak frankly and bravely about the complex feelings: the emotional and psychological affect of being a woman, was perhaps Eyles’s greatest achievement as an agony aunt; one that paved the way for a new breed of modern agony journalism today, including the recent work of Philippa Perry. Eyles took the problem page seriously. She saw how it could disseminate and validate female experience by taking it into the mainstream, encouraging women to demand more; not only a ‘living’ but also a ‘Life,’ which was rewarding and fulfilling.

#### **Endnotes**

1. Leonora Eyles, “From One Woman to Another,” *Modern Woman*, October, 1925, 72.
2. Leonora Eyles, *Careers for Women* (London: Elkin Matthews & Marrot, 1930), 11.
3. Maroula Joannou, “The Woman in the Little House: Leonora Eyles and Socialist-Feminism” in ‘Ladies, Please Don’t Smash These Windows’: *Women’s Writing, Feminist Consciousness and Social Change 1918-38* (Oxford/Providence USA: Berg, 1995), 54-76. Also see Juliet Gardiner, *The Thirties: An Intimate History* (London: Harper Press: 2010), 55 and Sheila Rowbotham, *Dreamers of a New Day: Women Who Invented the Twentieth Century* (London & New York: Verso, 2010), 54, 77-9, 100, 226, 119. Over twenty titles are listed under Eyles’s name in the British Library catalogue.
4. Joannou, ‘Ladies,’ 64. This chapter is developed from research undertaken for my doctoral thesis: Fiona Hackney, “‘They Opened Up a Whole New World’: Feminine Modernity and the Feminine Imagination in Women’s Magazines, 1919-1939” (PhD diss., Goldsmith’s College University of London, 2012), which forms the basis of the monograph: *Women’s Magazines and the Feminine Imagination: Opening Up a New World for Women in Interwar Britain* (London & New York: I. B. Tauris, 2016).
5. Leonora Eyles, *The Ram Escapes* (London: Nevill, 1953).



6. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).
7. George Lansbury, "Our Next Issue," *Lansbury's Labour Weekly*, June 13, 1925, 7. Both titles were published by George Newnes. From 1932 Newnes published the popular weekly, *Woman's Own* with Eyles as correspondence page editor and agony aunt.
8. Gerry Holloway, *Women and Work in Britain since 1840* (London & New York: Routledge, 2005).
9. 1921 census shows 5,036,727 out of a total population of 14,959,282 women and 5,606,143 women workers in 1931 out of a total population of 16, 410,894. Jane Lewis, *Women in England, 1870-1950: Sexual Division and Social Change* (London & New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1984), 146-9.
10. Sally Alexander, *Becoming a Woman, And Other Essays in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Feminist History* (London: Virago, 1994), 206.
11. Highest participation (79 per cent) was amongst 18 to 20 year olds, the rate falling dramatically after the age of 24. Miriam Glucksmann, *Women Assemble: Women Workers and the New Industries in Inter-War Britain* (London & New York: Routledge, 1990), 41. Clerical jobs for women increased during and after the First World War and by 1931 women accounted for 42 per cent of the clerical workforce. Selina Todd, "Poverty and Aspiration: Young Women's Entry to Employment in Inter-war England," *Twentieth Century British History*, 15 (2004): 122.
12. Holloway, *Women and Work*, 150. If older, these single women were unlikely to marry and therefore more likely to work until retirement. Lewis, *Women in England*, 149 and Katherine Holden, *The Shadow of Marriage: Single Women in England 1914-60* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press: 2007).
13. The subtitle may refer to the prominent modernist architect Le Corbusier's journal, *L'Esprit Nouveau*, which was published in Paris at this time. Audited circulation figures for *Modern Woman* were 95,000 a month in 1938; actual readership is likely to have been three times this figure. Cynthia White, *Women's Magazines, 1693-1968* (London: Michael Joseph, 1970), Appendix V.
14. For more on Victoria Drummond see Virginia Nicholson, *Singled Out: How Two Million Women Survived Without Men after the First World War* (London & New York: Penguin, 2007), 107-9, 242, 258.
15. E. M. B, "The Sea as a Career for Women," *Modern Woman*, August, 1927, 71 & "This Wonderful World: The Women Who Succeed: Advertising Executive Florence Sangster," *Modern Woman*, September, 1929, 40. The 1919 Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act removed barriers to women's entry into the professions, numbers, however, only rose from 350,000 in 1921 to 390,000 in 1931. Holloway, *Women and Work*, 149.
16. White, *Women's Magazines*, 96. Other consumer titles include: *Good Housekeeping* (1922), *Woman and Home* (1926), *Wife and Home* (1929), *Mother* (1936), *Woman's Journal* (1927).
17. Author's interview with Mary Dilnot, who worked as a 'sub' at *Woman's Weekly* in the 1930s and later became editor. 2 February, 1995.
18. Leonora Eyles, *The Woman in the Little House* (London: Grant Richards, 1922), 101-2. Annie Britain, the symbolic heroine, was intended to represent an ordinary English working-class woman, wife and mother.
19. Jennifer Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings: The Ladies' Home Journal, Gender, and the Promises of Consumer Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1995), 183-5.
20. Ethel M. Wood, "Advertising as a Career for Women", *Modern Advertising*, Vol. 1 (London: New Era Publishing, 1925), 180.

21. Eyles ruefully contrasted advertising with her experience of journalism where women, no matter how highly qualified, were generally relegated to 'women's page stuff;' even then male editors complained that they could not find women with 'enough brains and education' to supply the copy required. Eyles, *Careers*, 19.
22. Cicely Hamilton, *Marriage as a Trade* (London: The Women's Press, 1909), 129.
23. Robin Kent, *Aunt Agony Advises: Problem Pages Through the Ages* (London: W.H. Allen, 1979).
24. John Shepherd, *George Lansbury: at the heart of old Labour* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2004).
25. Leonora Eyles, "The Woman's Part," *Lansbury's Labour Weekly*, February 28, 1925, 4.
26. George Lansbury, "Our Next Issue," *Lansbury's Labour Weekly*, June 13, 1925, 7.
27. Advertisements, which occasionally ran on the problem page, included those for publications advising on birth control including Marie Stopes's "A Letter to Working Mothers" and Margaret Sanger's "Family Limitation". *Lansbury's Labour Weekly*, 7 November 1925, 15. Eyles and Stopes corresponded 1926-7. Whilst Eyles could not deal with birth control in her column because it caused trouble in the Party, she offered readers information privately. Joannou 'Ladies,' 66-7 and *Lansbury's Labour Weekly*, September 5, 1925, 2.
28. Leonora Eyles, "Can You Write A Short Story?," *Lansbury's Labour Weekly*, December 5, 1925, 2.
29. I read every column during the first year of publication (25 issues). Themes covered are quite diverse and difficult to classify. Aside from work related problems and unemployment, topics that appeared repeatedly include: illegitimate children, debt, pension problems, marital problems, loneliness, health (from morning sickness to consumption), homelessness, finance (bogus insurance), accidents, drink, crime, sex outside marriage, dress etiquette, as well as love problems, blushing and stammering.
30. Martha, "Problems," October 3, 1925, 2.
31. Martha, "Problems," June 20, 1925, 2.
32. Martha, "Problems," September 5, 1925, 2 and December 5, 1925, 15, for instance.
33. Martha, "Problems," 2.
34. Martha, "Problems," 2.
35. Martha, "Problems," August 29, 1925, 2.
36. Martha, "Problems," December 5, 1925, 15.
37. Martha, "Problems," August 15, 1925, 2, for instance.
38. Martha, "Problems," October 31, 1925, 2.
39. Martha, "Problems," June 20, 1925, 2.
40. *Modern Woman's* monthly sales were about half those for *Good Housekeeping*; it targeted middling households with incomes of £500 p.a. White, *Women's Magazines*, 95 and Appendix V. During my research with readers I only came across one woman who read *Modern Woman* regularly, Marjorie Denut, a teacher who confirmed the publication's readership among independently-minded, educated women.
41. Caitriona Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens: Domesticity and the Women's Movement in England, 1928-1964* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).
42. Judy Giles, *Women, Identity and Private Life in Britain, 1900-50* (Hampshire & London: Macmillan Press, 2004), 123. *Modern Woman*, June 1925, 7.
43. See Mark S. Morrison, *The Public Face of Modernism: Little Magazines, Audiences, and Reception 1905-1920* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001); Ann Ardis and Patrick Collier, eds., *Transatlantic Print*

Culture, 1880-1940: Emerging Media, Emerging Modernisms (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) for a discussion of counter-public sphere and print culture.

44. Eyles, *The Little House*, 132-3.

45. I looked at 21 issues of the problem page from 1925-1929. Out of a total of 107 letters, 35 dealt with employment; 41 with personal issues and relationships; 12 with finance and the home; 11 with single and married women's or couples' problems; 8 discussed sexual relationships and birth control.

46. Sheila Rowbotham, *Dreamers*, 79.

47. For a discussion of methodology and details about the readers and journalists interviewed see Hackney, "They Opened Up a Whole New World."

48. Leonora Eyles, "From One Woman to Another," *Modern Woman*, June, 1925, 72.

49. Eyles, "From One Woman," 72.

50. Eyles, "From One Woman," September, 1925, 72.

51. *Lansbury's Labour Weekly*, June 20, 1925, 2.

52. Leonora Eyles, "From One Woman," October, 1925, 72.

53. Eyles, *Careers*, 9. Careers discussed included: the medical profession, engineering, veterinary surgery, welfare and social service, dairy farming, aviation, photography, education, crafts and woodworking, gardening, secretarial and office work, shop assistant, dress design and fashion drawing, beauty culture, domestic work and home making. The emphasis on forging a path in the professions and business was echoed in Jullia Cairns, ed., *Careers for Girls* (London: Hutchinson, undated but in the '30s) which included chapters on medicine by Winifred C. Cullis, advertising by Ethel M. Wood, business and commerce by Lady Rhondda, accountancy, dentistry, journalism, engineering, architecture, the bar etc., alongside a chapter on marriage and home-making by Lady Askwith.

54. Eyles, "From One Woman," October, 1925, 72; November, 1925, 68; December, 1925, 76; March, 1927, 84; July, 1927, 88; August, 1927, 80; September, 1927, 88; November, 1927, 180; December, 1927, 10; January, 1929, 96; February, 1929, 92; March, 1929, 96; April, 1929, 100; May, 1929, 96; June, 1929, 100; July, 1929, 96; August, 1929, 96; October, 1929, 61.

55. Elidor Briggs explored teaching, nursing, 'outdoor careers' and 'careers of service.' She identified radiography, journalism, commercial traveler, window dresser, clerical and secretarial work and advertising as promising careers, arguing that the latter was 'one of the most interesting and suitable kinds of work for women', *Modern Woman*, August 1932, 30,

56. By the end of March 1919 the Ministry of Labour recorded over half a million women unemployed. Deirdre Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty: Women Between the Wars 1918-1939* (London: Pandora, 1989), 49.

57. Eyles, "From One Woman," November, 1925, 68.

58. Eyles, "From One Woman," August, 1927, 80 & February, 1929, 92.

59. Eyles, "From One Woman," April, 1929, 100; August, 1925, 72, for instance.

60. Eyles, "From One Woman," June, 1929, 100.

61. She did, however, discuss the question of equal pay in her book. Eyles, *Careers*, 22.

62. Eyles, "From One Woman," October, 1925, 72. Eyles, *The Ram*, 91.

63. Eyles, "From One Woman," July, 1927, 88; November, 1925, 68; March, 1929, 96.

64. Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Ellen Swallow Richards, for example. Rowbotham, *Dreamers*, 125.

65. Rowbotham, *Dreamers*, 130.

66. Lucy Delap, *The Feminist Avant-Garde: Transatlantic Encounters of the Early Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 145-153.
67. Eyles, "From One Woman," May, 1929, 96.
68. Eyles, *Careers*, 36.
69. "Engaging a Domestic Worker," *Modern Woman*, December 1926, 68; "Teach Your Maid," *Home Chat*, August 11, 1934, 271.
70. Rowbotham, *Dreamers*, 138.
71. Fiona Hackney, "Use Your Hands for Happiness: Home Craft & Make-do-and-mend in British Women's Magazines in the 1920s & 1930s," *Journal of Design History* 19 (2006): 24-38. Pat Kirkham, "Women and the Inter-war Handicrafts Revival," in *A View from The Interior, Women and Design*, ed. Judy Attfield and Pat Kirkham (London: The Women's Press, 1989), 174-83.
72. Eyles "From One Woman," September, 1927, 88.
73. Eyles, "From One Woman," December, 1927, 100; Eyles, *Careers*, 21.
74. Steven Gelber, *Hobbies: Leisure and the Culture of Work* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 19-20
75. Gelber, *Hobbies*, 3. Jane Lewis, ed., *Labour and Love, Women's Experience of Home and Family, 1850-1940* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986). Current interest in an alternative crafts economy has resulted in a revival of these debates today see Fiona Hackney, "Quiet Activism & the New Amateur: the power of home and hobby crafts" in *Design and Culture* 5 (2013): 169-194.
76. The term also appeared in *Woman's Weekly's* career column in 1919, where it was described as a 'terrible mishap,' and referred to those who, without benefit of skills or experience, had to support themselves and often dependents; largely war widows at this time. "Chats," October 18, 1919, 316.
77. Eyles, *Careers*, 5-6 & 50-65.
78. Eyles, *Careers*, 61 & 65. In this she built on the ideals of the arts and crafts movement, but extended these into the home and beyond the realm of trained professionals. Jude Burkhauser, ed., *Glasgow Girls: Women in Art and Design 1880-1920* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1990).
79. Eyles, *Careers*, 64.
80. Eyles, "From One Woman," August, 1925, 64.
81. She was not alone in this as feminists such as Olive Schreiner "Reworked Work,." See Rowbotham, *Dreamers*, 193-209.
82. Vera Brittain, *Women's Work in Modern England* (London: Noel Douglas, 1928); Olive Schreiner, *Women and Labour* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1911). Eyles went so far as to blame the "vexed question of equal pay for equal work" on parasitic wives who "blackleg" those, such as herself, who "refuse to be 'kept.'" Eyles, *Careers*, 22-3.
83. Eyles, "From One Woman," July, 1927, 88 & June, 1929, 100.
84. Eyles, *Careers*, 32.
85. Eyles, *Careers*, 8-9.
86. Alexander, *Becoming*.
87. Todd, "Poverty and Aspiration," 140; Hackney, "They Opened Up."

88. Penny Tinkler, "Women and Popular Literature" in *Women's History: Britain, 1850-1950*, ed. June Purvis (London: UCL Press, 1995), 132-156; Claire Langhamer, *Women's Leisure in England 1920-1960* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).
89. Lesley A. Hall, *The Life and Times of Stella Browne: Feminist and Free Spirit* (London & New York: I.B. Tauris: 2011), 102.
90. Joannou, *Ladies*, 76.
91. Leonora Eyles, *Hidden Lives* (London: Heinemann, 1922) features such startling scenes as an infanticide, and a strong-minded heroine driven by her sense of social duty, but felled by her passion for a demented priest.
92. Leonora Eyles, "Death in the Teacup" and "Chained to the Slums," *Lansbury's Labour Weekly*, September 19, 1925, 7 & September 26, 1925, 13.
93. Eyles, "The Woman's Part: Amusements," March 28, 1925, 14; Leonora Eyles, *Women's Problems of Today* (London: The Labour Publishing Co, 1926); Eyles, "From One Woman," May, 1929, 96, and March 1929, 96.
94. Eyles, *Careers*, 8, 27.
95. Eyles, "From One Woman," January, 1929, 96
96. Leonora Eyles, "The Unattached Woman," *Good Housekeeping*, 1928 in *Things My Mother Should Have Told Me: The Best of Good Housekeeping 1922-1940*, ed., Brian Briathwaite and Noëlle Walsh (London: Ebury Press, 1991), 74-5.
97. Braithwaite et al, *Things My Mother*, 164-5.

